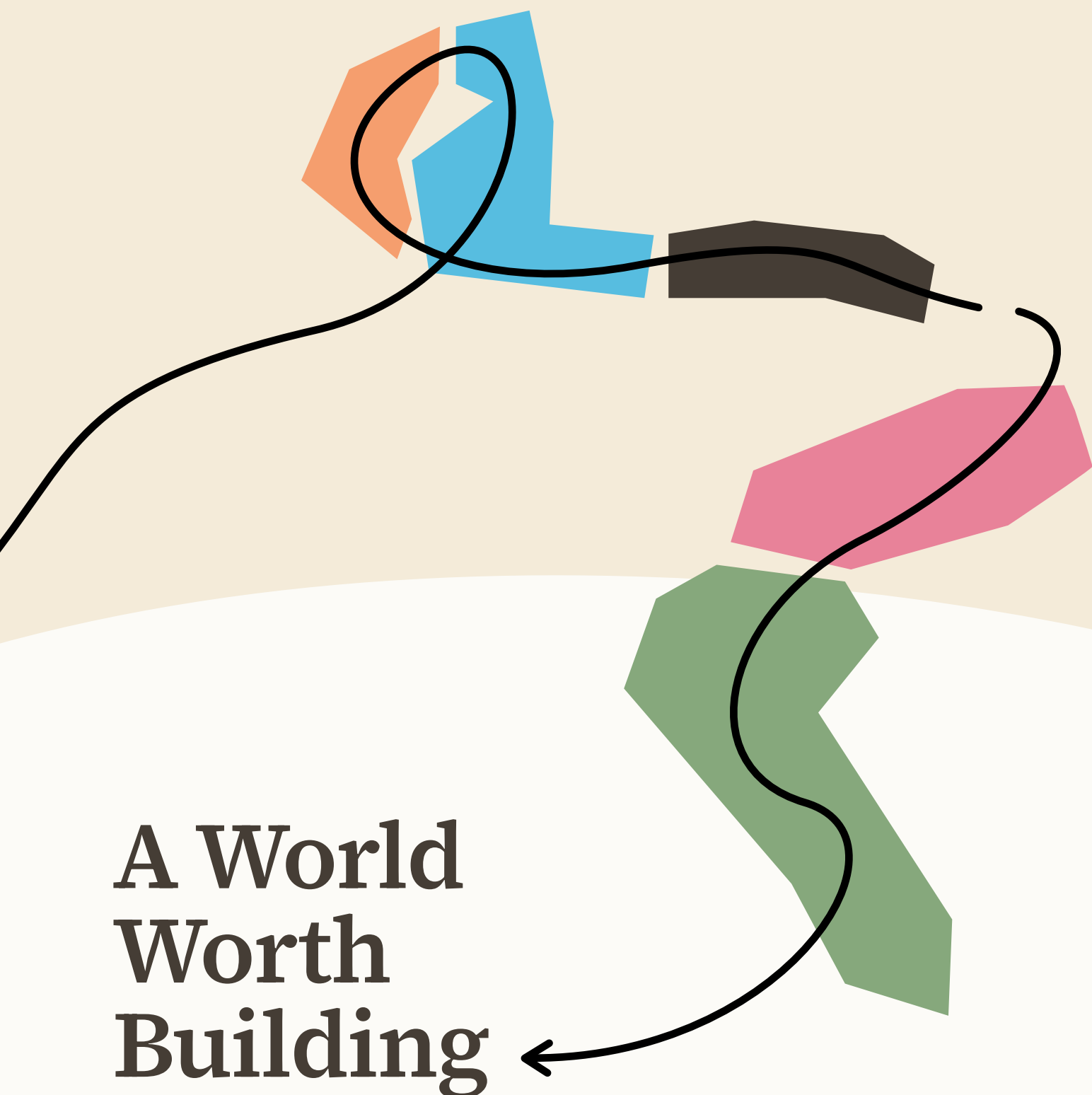




A World Worth Building

UNDERSTANDING THE
PRACTICE AND THE PROMISE
OF CHILD PROTECTION

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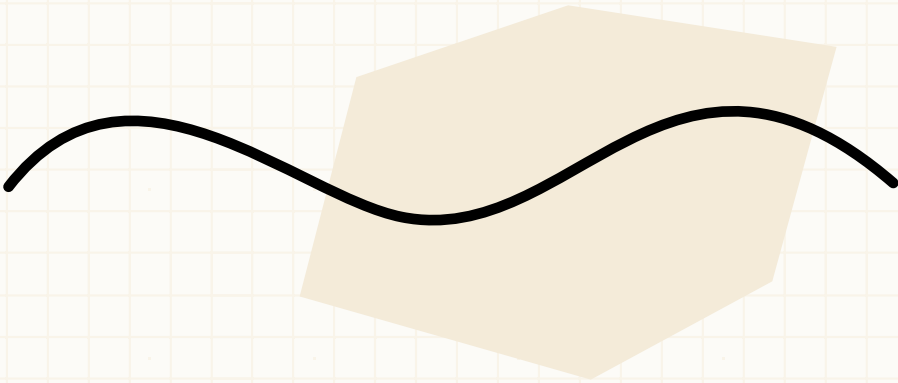
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About the Transform NEEV Collective

The Transform NEEV Collective is working towards building a foundation that is ‘Child and Family First’, in favour of preventive and family- based care interventions to address child protection issues. The initiative addresses systemic issues affecting children living in some of the most marginalized communities, ranging from access to health facilities, education, nutrition, safety, to basic amenities, identity documentation, social protection schemes and holistic childhood opportunities.

Partners of the collective including Dasra, Leher, Miracle Foundation India, Prerana, Sambodhi and UNICEF, collaborate and work with critical stakeholders to address these issues ensuring children grow in safe, secure and thriving environments. Through almost 4 years of interventions the Collective has worked through collaborative action, aimed at achieving the core outcomes of strengthening families and communities, enhancing government systems, establishing and advocating for family-based alternative care models, and fostering an ecosystem supporting children. At its core, the Transform NEEV Collective aims to build a replicable collective action intervention model to effectively address systemic child protection issues.



How to Read this Report



There is no universal childhood. For some, it unfolds in the loving embrace and care of their families and communities. For others, it may be shadowed by hunger, displacement, abuse, or the silent burden of being invisible in a world that moves too fast. Children experience vulnerabilities that are as complex as the systems around them. **Amid this diversity of circumstance, one truth holds: the way we protect children is the clearest measure of who we are as a society.**

And yet, in a world that so often prioritizes speed, scale, and efficiency, we risk overlooking the fragile architecture that safeguards childhood. For more than a century, the child protection sector has carried this truth as its purpose, ensuring that children's safety and well-being are treated as a collective, non-negotiable responsibility. Much of its work takes place behind the scenes: building legal protections, strengthening social safety nets, and nurturing networks of care. Practitioners, policymakers, field workers, and youth leaders across the globe remain steadfast in their commitment, that every child, regardless of circumstance, deserves to grow up free from fear.

When we design with the most vulnerable in mind, we create stronger, more resilient systems for everyone. A world that keeps its children at the center, at its core, is a world children can call their own. And that is a world worth building.

Our report begins with this belief. It traces how child protection has evolved, often against formidable odds, and why it continues to endure. Anchored by the **Transform NEEV Collective and Dasra**, with support from **UBS Optimus Foundation**, this report draws on the collective wisdom of practitioners. It is designed as a practical resource for decision-makers across the child protection ecosystem in India. However, it is not prescriptive. It is a composition of learnings and insights, captured through years of undertaking child protection work.

What's in the Report?

A descriptive view:

- ~ Gleaning how children's vulnerabilities signal breakdowns in broader systems
- ~ Providing an overview of systemic architecture, with both opportunities and gaps

+ Actionable lessons:

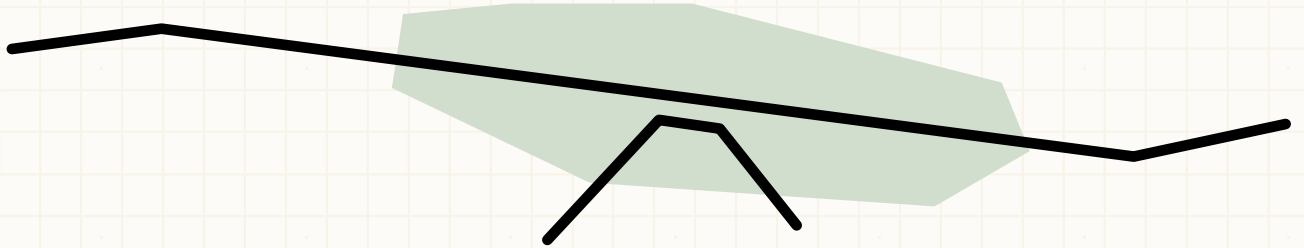
- ▶ Capturing child protection as a diagnostic tool and design principle to solve for vulnerable populations
- ▶ Finding Cross-sectoral linkages across issue areas such as education, health, climate action

A strategic roadmap for the future:

- ~ Embedding child protection principles into development architecture to build resilience
- ~ Carving out a call to action for philanthropy to be more intentional about funding this space

The Report also includes case studies from Neev partners, including Leher, Miracle Foundation India, Prerana, and UNICEF.

This Report seeks to deepen understanding and catalyze action toward a stronger, more responsive child protection ecosystem in India. At its core, the Report is an invitation to philanthropists, CSR leaders, and family foundations to reimagine child protection as foundational to all development efforts, and to engage more intentionally with the root causes of vulnerability. Through the Report, we hope to catalyze two shifts: in perception, from seeing child protection as peripheral to recognizing it as central for building resilient systems; and in practice, toward more deliberate, systems-informed investments that anticipate and address harm before it occurs.



Chapter 1

A Century of Protection, A Future in the Balance

1.1

Global Forces, Local Futures

Demographic upheavals, climate disruption, geopolitical instability, and technological acceleration are converging in ways that are fundamentally reshaping how children live, learn, move, and stay safe. In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, child marriage rates rose by 82% during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Afghanistan, prolonged drought and ongoing conflict have intensified child marriage and child labor, with some families driven to the desperate measure of sending children to fight in exchange for money. In the most extreme cases, parents reported giving their children sleeping pills to suppress hunger. In the Sundarbans, the advancing impacts cyclones, flooding, river erosion, and saltwater intrusion from the Bay of Bengal have repeatedly displaced families and destroyed the livelihoods of those dependent on agriculture and fishing. Environmental experts, activists, and local officials warn that this cycle of loss has created a population increasingly vulnerable to exploitation, including human trafficking.³

Across geographies, childhood is being reshaped by forces that are at once immediate and systemic. Armed conflict, climate volatility, economic precarity, and the rapid digitization of social life are overlapping stressors that compound risks and vulnerabilities for children, particularly for children already living at the margins.

The contours of this crisis are both visible and deeply structural. What is emerging is a deepening of systemic fragility: the cumulative inability of policies, institutions, and communities to anticipate, absorb, and respond to layered vulnerabilities. The 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons documents a grim shift: child trafficking for labor, once largely confined to low-income countries, is now rising in high-income ones.⁴ Beneath the surface of visible economic development, children are being trafficked, sexually exploited, and recruited into armed groups, drug networks, and other forms of illicit work. Even in seemingly stable societies, children endure domestic abuse, cybercrime, economic hardship, and emotional neglect.

1.2

The Shifting Frontlines of Child Protection in India

India does not sit apart from these global shifts. Reported crimes against children have risen sharply over the past decade, even as overall crime rates have declined.⁵ Over 10 million children remain engaged in labour, a reality intensified by pandemic-driven migration and economic stress. And according to UNICEF, one in three of the world's child brides lives in India.⁶

Earlier national statistical appraisals document further breadth: 1.01 crore working children aged 5-14 in the 2011 Census⁷; 20.42 lakh children under six living with disability⁸; and 5 per cent of children under 18 reported as orphans in NFHS-4⁹, with vulnerability increasing sharply with age. These figures make one point clear: the true work of child protection sits at the intersections of poverty, gender, migration, education, disability, and justice.

And yet, these same conditions also make India a critical site of learning.

Across the country, practitioners have been sounding a consistent alarm: systems designed to protect children are under unprecedented strain, with ripple effects across every development domain. But they have also been building and innovating within constraints, stitching together responses across sectors, and expanding the very definition of what protection can mean. In this sense, India's child protection ecosystem, is both under pressure and under construction.

Home to one of the world's largest child populations, India embodies both the scale of the challenge and the possibility of transformation. At one level, this ecosystem is formal: comprising legal frameworks, welfare schemes, law enforcement, education systems, and health services. Over the past decades, India has built an extensive architecture, from child protection laws to national missions and frontline delivery mechanisms.¹¹ At another level, the ecosystem is also informal: anchored in families, communities, and informal networks that often serve as the first, and sometimes only, line of protection. Norms around gender, discipline, labour, and mobility shape both the risks children face and the responses available to them.

What India has built, in many ways, is extraordinary: an ecosystem that blends global frameworks with localized governance, formal mandates with community-led action. What remains unresolved, however, is the unevenness between what is designed and what is delivered. Bridging this gap is crucial to securing the safety and wellbeing of children in India.

Sharp Edges Of Society

To understand child vulnerability, it helps to trace it, by considering the lived sequence of moments across the touchpoints that shape a child's life: home, school, community, and the increasingly uncertain world.

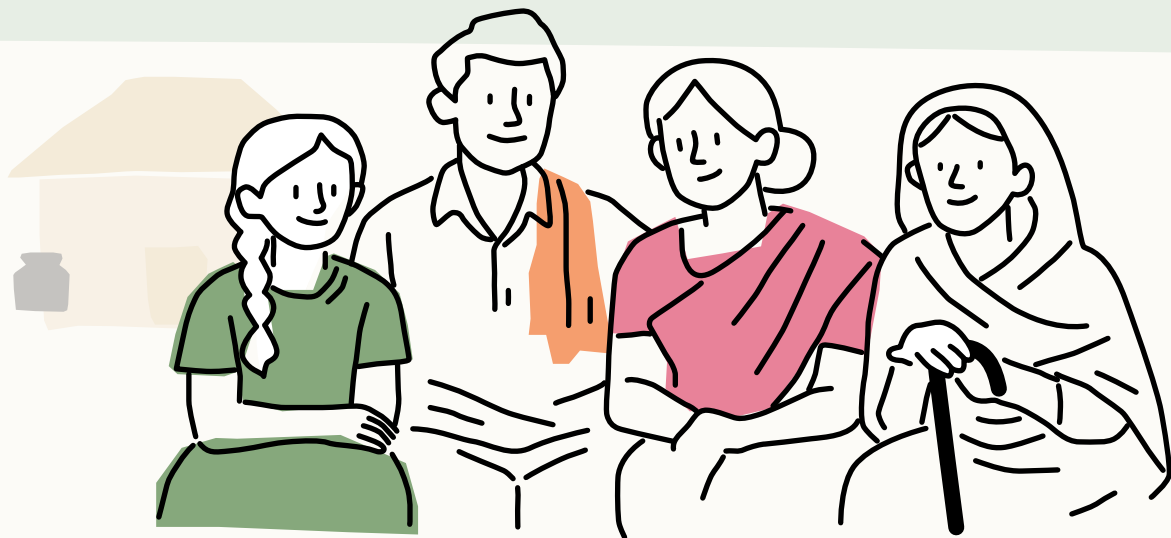
01

Systemic lapses

~ Severe debt burden and economic stress

~ Lack of a formal moneylending system governed by relevant state laws

~ Knowledge gaps about the services and public health schemes



RADHA KUMARI: 13

JAGDISH: 36

ANITA: 30

RUKMINIBAI: 90

02

Systemic lapses

~ Burden of gender-related domestic and care work

~ Adverse impact on the quality and continuity of education

~ Depriving the child of time for leisure and play



4:30 AM

10:00 AM

5:00 PM

03

Systemic lapses

~ Climate-related migration as a driver of child marriage

~ Absence of Village Child Protection Committees and Children's Groups for early warnings

~ Lack of alternative care within existing kinship structures, such as extended family



04

Systemic lapses

~ Child marriage being socially acceptable in highly patriarchal societies

~ Breakdown in access to the protective environment of schools

~ Inadequate identification of and outreach for at-risk children



05 Systemic lapses

- ~ Domestic work remains a largely unregulated sector, making it a blind spot for labor inspectors
- ~ Failure to enforce the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, especially since marriage was used as collateral



06 Systemic lapses

- ~ Low public awareness and mandatory reporting requirements for neighbors and employers
- ~ Child development outcomes affecting Radha's health and psychosocial well-being

07 Systemic lapses

- ~ Shortage of specialized trauma-informed recovery centers for trafficking survivors
- ~ Difficulty in coordinating charges across multiple acts and constituencies (Child Marriage, Child Labor, and Trafficking)



Disclaimer: The above information is a fictionalized synthesis of child protection trends and aggregated case data. It is intended for indicative purposes only and does not represent any specific individual or case.

1.3

A 100-Year Lesson from Child Protection

Radha's story is, in one sense, a chronicle of failure, of countless such lives marked by a system that wasn't there, a protection that didn't hold. But it is also, in the most important sense, a map. Every point of failure is a point of possible intervention. Every gap is, in principle, closeable. This is the foundational argument of child protection as a field, and it has been refined, tested, and deepened across more than a century of practice.

If vulnerabilities are systemic, and protection is contingent on institutions, policies, and communities working effectively and in tandem, then the needs of children must be understood within that wider ecosystem. A more future-oriented approach is gradually emerging: one that prioritizes prevention over response, engages proximate actors alongside formal institutions, builds multi-stakeholder coordination, and increasingly centers children as participants in shaping their own futures.

Grounded in a century of learning, it offers valuable insights:

Vulnerability

is dynamic

While certain risks may be inherent to a child's context, they are invariably intensified by external shocks: economic downturns, climate events, conflict, or displacement.

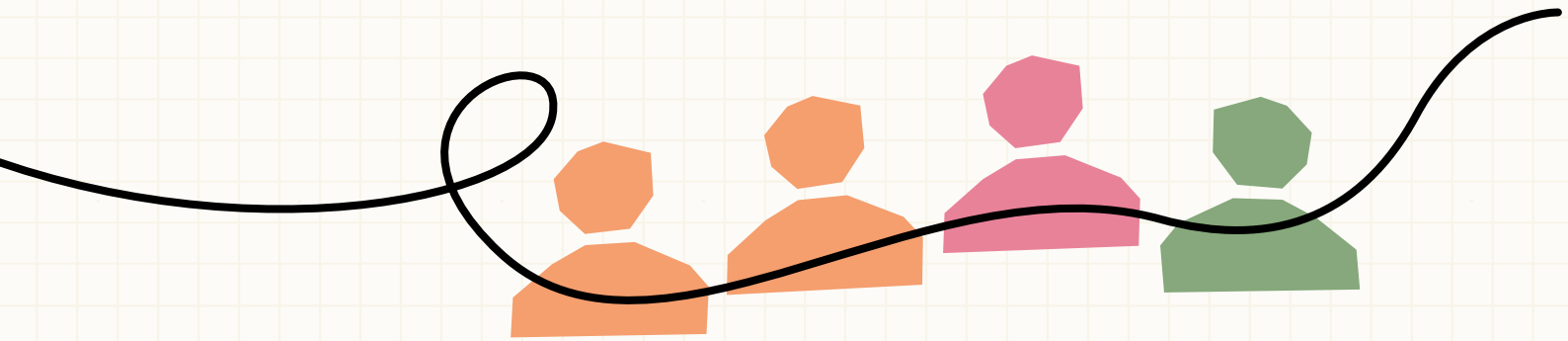
is complex

Children do not move through risk in linear ways. Their needs evolve across life stages, often requiring sustained, coordinated engagement across systems.

is not insurmountable

Equity, agency, and community are central to resilience. In nurturing environments, vulnerabilities can be actively overcome.

Taken together, these lessons extend far beyond the boundaries of child protection as a sector. They offer a lens through which to approach some of the most complex challenges of our time, from climate adaptation and urbanization to public health and education reform. To this end, the Indian example offers a blueprint for development systems and efforts to transform: one that meets fragility with empathy, and complexity with coherence.



Chapter 2

Overview of the Child Protection Ecosystem in India

2.1

A Culture of Care, An Architecture of Trust

If the preceding chapter makes the case for child protection as a systems challenge, this chapter turns to the system itself: how it is constituted, how it functions, and how its resilience must be deliberately engineered at multiple levels in the architecture of child protection.

The child protection ecosystem in India has steadily strengthened by adopting global best practices, engaging diverse stakeholders, and building responsive, accountable protection systems. It requires participation and support from diverse stakeholders: families, communities, civil society organizations, and formal institutions working together to anticipate, reduce, and respond to harm. When these actors collaborate, they create a culture of care that is far greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, a closer look at how child protection systems evolve can provide insights into building an effective architecture of trust.

At the constitutional level, there are four governing acts, which are mandates of two apex bodies.

Legal Provisions for Child Protection

National Commission for Protection of Child Rights

a statutory commission that reviews laws and programs to ensure they meet the rights of children

&

Ministry of Women and Child Development

an apex body for formulation and administration of rules, regulations and laws relating to women and child development in India

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act aims to protect children from punishment and ensure their care and development (“JJ Act”)

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act protects children from sexual abuse and harassment, and establishes special courts to try these offenses (“POCSO”)

Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act prohibits children under 14 from working in certain occupations

Prohibition of Child Marriage Act protects children from child marriage and helps victims

India has established a robust framework of special apparatus and agencies to safeguard children’s rights and welfare, as explained below:

Policy Architecture for Child Protection

Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS)

The JJ Act

Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) constituted in every district, address the needs of children requiring care and protection

Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) focus on children in conflict with the law, ensuring their rehabilitation and development

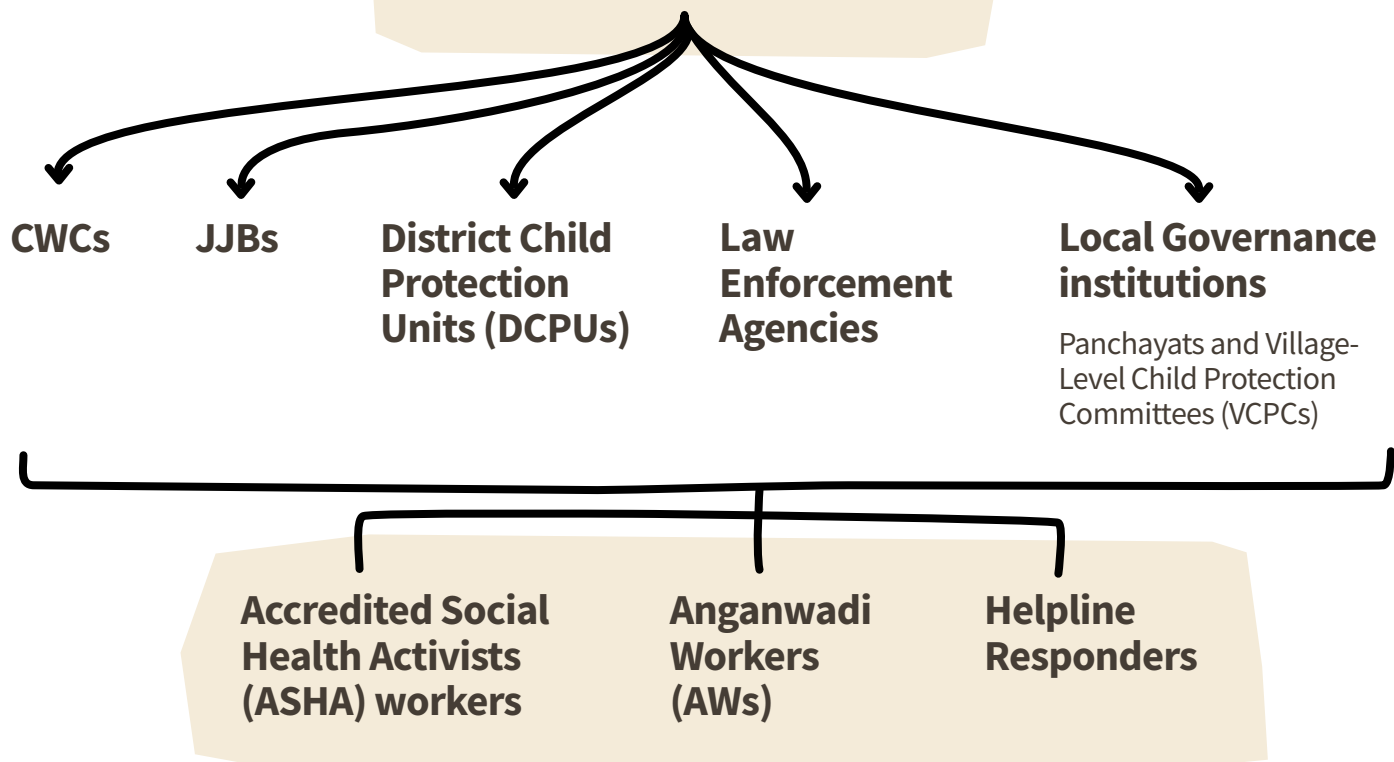
Complementing these is the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS), which is tasked with the following:

ICDS → Nutrition > Health > Early Learning for Children & Mothers

Mission Vatsalya

The government's flagship child protection framework, illustrates this distributed model where responsibility is shared.

At its core are these statutory bodies:



Sometimes this coordination flows top-down—from policy to practice. Other times, it emerges bottom-up—from grassroots initiatives that shape and influence state response. And yet, despite this impressive lattice of laws, schemes, and institutions, India's child protection framework remains, in many ways, more geared toward processing violations than preventing harm or enabling recovery.

2.2

It Takes a Village to Raise a Child

Particularly in India, NGOs have been pivotal in building an unbending culture of care and accountability across the child protection ecosystem, often stepping into the spaces left unaddressed by formal infrastructure. Over the decades, the ecosystem has been shaped by the frontline workers who intervene before harm escalates, by barefoot lawyers who navigate the interstices between statutory rights and lived realities, and by grassroots organizations solving for seasonal migration patterns, changing rainfall, and rising absenteeism in village schools.

Organizations like Child Rights and You (CRY), HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, and Childline began by documenting violations that were hidden in plain sight.¹² Gradually, NGOs' roles and responsibilities have only expanded in both depth and scope over time. From being watchdog to partner, mobiliser to knowledge producer, they have grown to inspire public budgets, shape legislation and make institutional reforms. They have brought into focus the subtler dimensions of harm – the way seasonal migration can disrupt schooling, how climate variability can exacerbate economic vulnerability, or why overburdened institutions might fail to respond even when they are aware of risk.¹³

2.3

Understanding the Funding Landscape in India

Child Protection work in India has been gradually transitioning from older patterns of issue-specific, crisis-driven funding toward a more holistic understanding of safety and addressing the root causes of child harm. However, this critical transition is precarious without equally holistic financial and policy support. India already has a broad range of laws covering children in need of care and protection, child marriage, child sexual abuse, and child labor, and child protection is increasingly recognized as a core component of social development.¹⁵ The challenges lie less in the absence of legal intent than in the unevenness of implementation, service quality, preventive capacity, and rehabilitation of support across geographies.¹⁶ For the coming decade to look meaningfully different, philanthropy will need to reimagine its role as a key builder of systems, investing in the architecture that makes safety durable, scalable, and sustained over time.

Public sector funding, while still the primary support framework, remains unevenly absorbed. The Union Budget's total allocation for the welfare of children was ₹1,16,132.50 crore in 2025–26 and ₹1,32,296.85 crore in 2026–27.¹⁷ Against that, Mission Vatsalya's ₹1,500 crore in 2025–26 was only about 1.29% of the total child-welfare envelope, and ₹1,550 crore in 2026–27 is only about 1.17%.¹⁸ For reference, India is home to approximately 460 million children under 18. Dividing Mission Vatsalya's 2026–27 total budget estimate of ₹1,550 crore by that child population, comes to only about ₹34 per child per year.¹⁹ That is a compelling illustration of how thin the dedicated central child-protection line looks against India's demographic scale.

Moreover, the pool of private sector investments has expanded significantly. India's development spending reached an estimated ₹25 lakh crore in FY2024, growing steadily over the past five years. Yet the public sector continues to account for 95% of this total. Unfortunately, the private sector funding picture in India is still too opaque. This imbalance is compounded by a lack of transparency. Data on private giving remains fragmented, obscuring the true scale of underinvestment in child protection. In the absence of visible financing flows, violence against children struggles to register within political priorities and funding decisions.

Slowly but surely, philanthropy has begun to evolve in response to this complexity. There is greater recognition that harm is rarely singular in cause, and that effective responses must extend beyond rescue toward prevention, family strengthening, and systems integration. Policy shifts toward non-institutional care, combined with lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, have further accelerated interest in mental health, psychosocial support, and community-based models

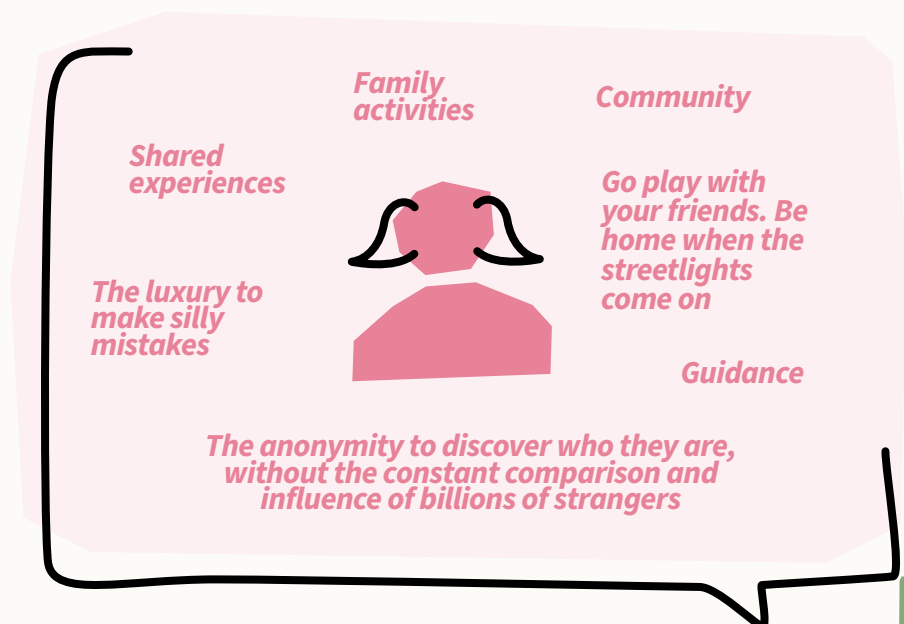
Chapter 3

Lessons from Child Protection: A Diagnostic Tool, A Design Principle

Child Protection as a Diagnostic Framework: Harm as a Signal

What is something you grew up with which you think children need more of today?

someone posted this question to a broad audience on Reddit, and these were the responses



3.1

Child Protection as a Diagnostic Tool: Anticipating for Prevention

What do today's children need? Simple things, really. And yet, it is increasingly difficult to guarantee in today's world. To treat child protection as a diagnostic tool is to see harm as a signal. Indeed, the harms children increasingly face today from either systemic neglect or individual cruelty, are gravely amplified by the inability of policies, institutions, and communities to anticipate and address children's intersecting vulnerabilities. When left unaddressed, these vulnerabilities accumulate and exacerbate, exposing children to cycles of harm that can endure for generations. Therefore, the proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" is best understood as a systems imperative.

3.1.1

Five Levers of the Diagnostic Framework from Leading Child Protection Models

01

LEVER

Proximity of Response

SIGNIFICANCE

Child protection systems are most effective when children are socially and physically/geographically close to protection services. Lower proximity leads to slower responses.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

Arpan's Trainings with Frontline Health workers like ASHAs, Teachers, and Peer Educators in Mumbai, demonstrate how child protection can sharpen systemic awareness of harm at its earliest stages. Its refresher courses designed to build emotional intelligence, confidence, the ability to identify early signs and subtle indicators of abuse help in diagnosing the hidden prevalence of child sexual abuse⁵⁶ and early intervention on related vulnerabilities like chronic health neglect.

02

LEVER

Coordination

SIGNIFICANCE

Multi-actor coordination involving frontline workers, communities, policymakers and nonprofits, is crucial to provide continuity of care and tackle systemic challenges in child protection.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

Aangan Trust's Suraksha Sakhi program informs local institutional response by diagnosing hyperlocal vulnerabilities in some of India's most marginalized communities, through neighborhood-level women's safety panels known as Suraksha Sakhis working with local police stations. They act as the first line of visibility for risks that might otherwise remain hidden: abuse, neglect, trafficking threats, unsafe community spaces, fostering stronger police-community trust, encouraging women and children to report issues without hesitation, while producing granular, real-time data about patterns of vulnerability, helping authorities understand where and why harm is occurring, and how structural weaknesses (from policing gaps to unsafe infrastructure) perpetuate it⁴¹.

03

LEVER

Case Management

SIGNIFICANCE

Efficient case management and tracking ensures no at-risk child falls through the cracks vis-à-vis rehabilitation and state entitlements.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

Bihar's integration of Child Protection Management Information System (CPMIS) with the Child Labour Tracking System (CLTS), supported by UNICEF, illustrates how child protection systems can diagnose and correct coordination failures between state bodies.⁶³ By assigning unique case IDs, tracking rehabilitation, and linking rescued children to entitlements via automated cards, the integrated system exposed and addressed systemic bottlenecks in access to support. The improved inter-departmental coordination has provided a governance blueprint for tracking other marginalized groups, strengthening the state's ability to deliver entitlements efficiently.

04

LEVER

Community Visibility

SIGNIFICANCE

Strong community visibility improves the likelihood of reporting by empowering children to seek help.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

KSCF's Bal Mitra Gram (Child-Friendly Villages) and Bal Mitra Mandal (Urban Adaptation) models illustrate how community-driven approaches such as implementing holistic solutions by empowering community-level stakeholders can diagnose entrenched forms of vulnerability. By working directly with rural and urban communities to end child labor, strengthen education access, and enforce children's rights, these models reveal how systemic drivers intersect to harm children. Importantly, the diagnostic power here lies in empowering children and communities to articulate their realities. The intelligence generated from these programs does not stay at the grassroots; it informs broader government responses and legislative reform, making visible the fault lines in formal child protection systems⁴².

05

LEVER

Data Use

SIGNIFICANCE

The collection, study and application of data helps to identify risk patterns and strategically guide the system's response to harm.

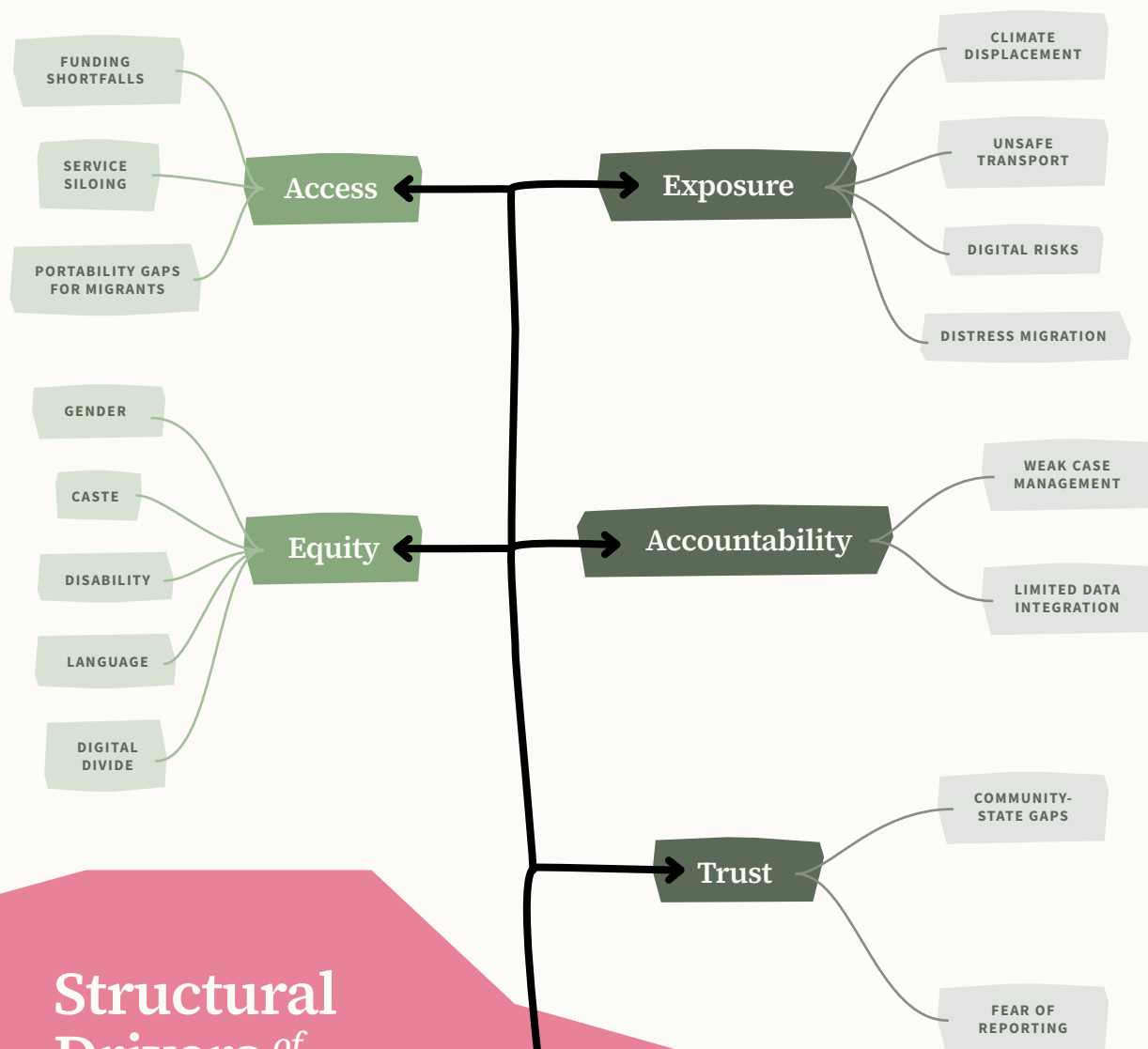
CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

TrackChild and CHILD Management Information System and Services (MISS) transformed fragmented, paper-based case management into a dynamic, cross-state digital ecosystem that itself diagnoses systemic weaknesses.⁵⁸ Real-time tracking prevents children from "disappearing" as cases move across state lines or between interventions. Civil society organizations shaped the alerts and workflows embedded in the system, ensuring that data translates into action. The digital infrastructure also exposed larger inefficiencies in public service delivery and interdepartmental coordination, which strengthened governance as a whole, improving outcomes not only for children, but for other vulnerable groups dependent on state care.

3.1.2

What are the structural drivers to test?

Every instance of abuse, neglect, or exploitation asks the same fundamental question: **Why was this child here, in this moment, without support?** This question pushes us beyond proximate explanations and forces us to examine the structural conditions that make harm possible. Seen through this lens, child protection illuminates the linkages between harm and its structural drivers.



Structural Drivers of Harm

Understanding harm as both a symptom and a consequence reframes the role of every sector that engages with vulnerable populations. It reveals that safeguarding cannot be confined to a single department, profession, or moment of crisis; it must begin everywhere, and all at once.

3.1.3

How to undertake a vulnerability diagnostic assessment?

Deeper inquiry into the lived experiences of children can help expose the interconnected undercurrents and vulnerabilities that would otherwise remain hidden. The step-wise assessment below includes some of the prompts and approaches, that can help practitioners, policymakers, and community actors translate the recognition of vulnerability into tangible strategies for inquiry and intervention.

Step 01

Scan early signals that suggest a child is at risk

Asking where the first breach might occur allows us to anticipate vulnerabilities before they compound.³⁵

Leher's Bal Suraksha Hub is a community-led, systems-based model for preventive child protection, operationalizing two core levers at the village level, VCPCs and CGs, which are capacitated to identify vulnerabilities, escalate risks, and engage directly with panchayats and service delivery mechanisms. They also meet monthly to identify and act on local protection risks like school dropout rates, and follow-up on attendance through home visits.

+ **Absence/
Dropouts**

+ **Behaviour
Change**

+ **Emotional
Withdrawal**

Practitioners must look for a child who might stop showing up to school, one who withdraws emotionally from the playground. Scanning for this silence and these absences trains practitioners to build their radar and respond to harm before it escalates³⁶.



DISHA reimagined prevention by exploring Spatial Risk-Mapping Design Frameworks for mapping vulnerability at the community level at different sites in Uttar Pradesh: unsafe school routes, child-labor hotspots, domestic-violence zones. This child-centered data allowed ward offices and gram sabhas to target interventions precisely. This approach shifted decision-making from reactive interventions to proactive resource allocation, demonstrating how child-focused data can strengthen governance and anticipate harm before it occurs.⁶⁸

+ **Fatigue/
Hunger**

+ **Unsafe
Routes**

Expanding the idea of harm beyond recognizable violence begins with overlooked symptoms such as fatigue, hunger, isolation, unsafe transport, and neglect in everyday settings.³⁷ Placing protection in such settings allows us to reduce the distance between risk and response, such as by embedding child protection in transport design, school training, neighborhood alerts.

Step 02

Mapping first-to-know actors: Who notices first—and what happens next?

The ecosystem in India demonstrates the opportunity to leverage the true potential of proximity. When frontline workers, caregivers, teachers, and local officials work together, the immediate sources of harm can be efficiently addressed.

~ **Teacher**

~ **Anganwadi Worker**

~ **ASHA**

Arpan's Trainings with Frontline Health Workers - ASHAs, AWW, teachers and peer educators demonstrates how child protection can sharpen systemic awareness of early stage harm. Their refresher courses are designed to build emotional intelligence, confidence, and the ability to identify early signs and subtle indicators of abuse, diagnosing the hidden prevalence of child sexual abuse and early intervention on related vulnerabilities, as more particularly explained above.



This diagnostic intelligence brings law enforcement and tech companies closer to the problem, enabling stronger safeguards for children while building frameworks for digital safety that protect all users in an increasingly online society.

~ **Peer**

~ **Shopkeeper**

~ **Platform Moderator**

As India's first anonymous reporting mechanism for child sexual abuse material, developed with the Internet Watch Foundation, **Aarambh India's Reporting Portal** addresses an emerging frontier of harm: the digital sphere.⁶⁰ Beyond giving citizens a channel to report online abuse, it has illuminated patterns of online exploitation and revealed how abuse networks operate across jurisdictions.



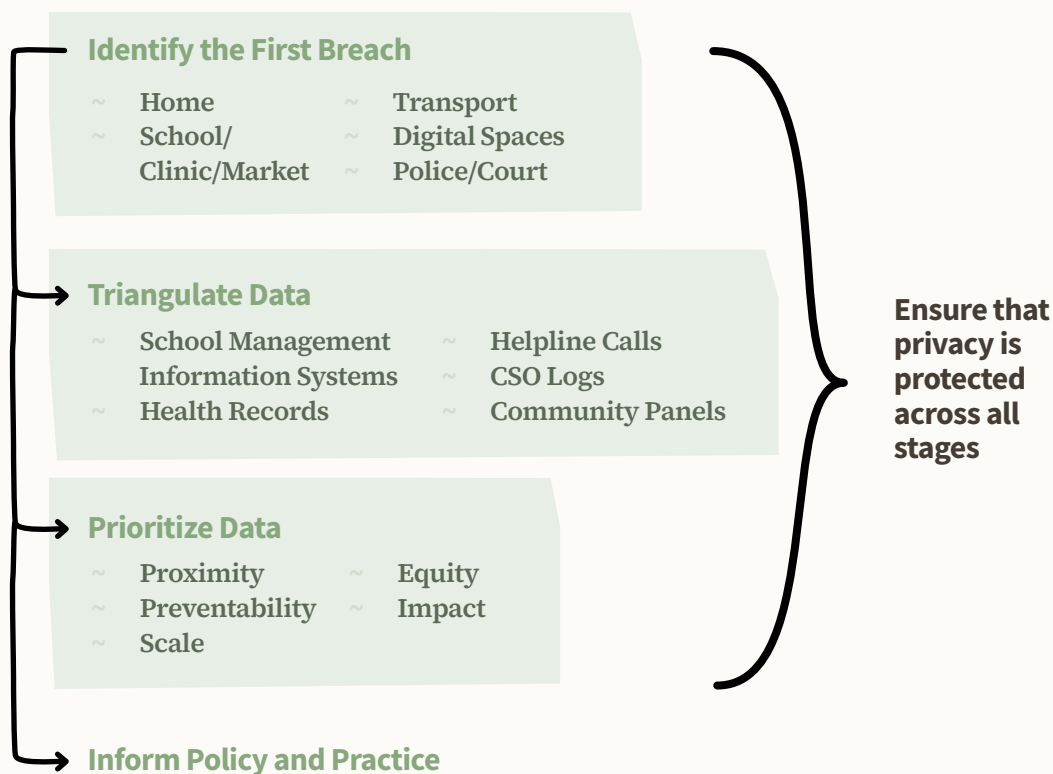
When organisations like Prerana treat legal identity as foundational, it opens a gateway to education, state entitlements, and civic participation for the children.

~ **Document Escalation Steps**

Prerana systematically facilitates access to documentation and citizenship rights, ensuring children can obtain Aadhaar cards, ration cards, and orphan certificates.

Step 03

Trace pathways and triangulate data



3.2

Child Protection as a Design Principle: Safeguarding for Cascading Vulnerability

Diagnosis is only a half-step. To treat child protection as a design principle is to embed the lessons of vulnerability into the architecture of every system that shapes children's lives - climate, health, education, social protection, justice, and digital. This means building child-sensitive considerations into urban planning so that neighborhoods are safe and navigable for children. It means strengthening healthcare, education, and social protection systems so they can anticipate and mitigate vulnerabilities, rather than simply respond when it is too late. It asks urban planners, health and education systems, digital platforms to hardwire privacy and safety safeguards, and climate adaptation strategies to account for children's disproportionate exposure to disasters. It prioritizes proximity of stakeholders and agency of the vulnerable child as core principles for designing solutions.

Delia Pop, Director at Tanya's Dream Fund and International Advisor for Child Protection notes, "A protection system that waits for separation and then funds a rescue is already too late." In design, this means proximity must become the operating requisite, strengthening the very pressure points that families, households and communities grapple with. Globally, practitioners and researchers have converged on a foundational framework that reflects this design imperative: the Protective Factors Framework.⁴³ More than a checklist for child protection programs, these pillars provide a universal blueprint for designing systems across sectors that are resilient to shocks and protective of the most vulnerable. They shift the focus from responding to harm, to reinforcing the family and community structures that prevent harm in the first place.

3.2.1

Five Pillars of the Design Framework from Leading Child Protection Models

01

CORE DESIGN PILLAR

Parental Resilience

Income Stability | Access to Schemes | Caregiving Capacity

SIGNIFICANCE

Families, especially those navigating intergenerational poverty, carry immense burdens, often without institutional support. And yet, targeted support towards stabilizing income, access to government schemes, and bolstering caregiving capacity strengthens resilience of the family unit.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

Miracle Foundation's Thrive Scale™

methodology is helping rewire how India's child protection system sees, understands, and supports vulnerable families. It identifies red flags (safety concerns), understands the specific needs of the child and family – pinpointing the domains to be prioritized, and measures progress of the intervention at every stage of the case management process, often plugging deficits in economic security.

02

CORE DESIGN PILLAR

Parenting & Child Development Knowledge

Early Learning | Local Parenting Support

SIGNIFICANCE

When parents are equipped with access to early learning programs, strengthening local delivery of parenting support, they are better able to nurture, respond, and set boundaries.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

Prerana undertakes parenting transformation programs. In contexts where parenting is involuntary or survival-driven, Prerana facilitates intergenerational dialogue and empathy-based training. Mothers, many of whom are survivors themselves, are supported to move from punitive or disengaged caregiving toward nurturing, relational parenting.

03

CORE DESIGN PILLAR

Social Connections

Kinship | Foster | Peer Networks

SIGNIFICANCE

Isolation amplifies risk; when families have peers to lean on, they are more likely to seek help, share burdens, and avoid extreme decisions like separation. Investing in SHGs, and other community-based mutual aid transforms informal ties into a protective ecosystem.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

Parivartan has taken steps to strategically strengthen women's self-help groups (SHGs) in Bihar, and turned informal community bonds into organized support systems. These empowered women proactively addressed child protection concerns—from health and nutrition to early marriage—demonstrating how grassroots collective agency can be a durable layer of protection for children. It also illustrates how systems can be anchored in community solidarity, making protection both deeply localized and self-sustaining.

04

CORE DESIGN PILLAR

Concrete Support
in Times of Need

Cash | Shelter | Transport

SIGNIFICANCE

Crisis is not the cause of separation, rather, lack of timely support is. Strategic, fast-acting, place-based safety nets can prevent a short-term hardship from becoming a long-term rupture; hence services must be designed for speed, simplicity, and dignity.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

States of Kerala and Assam were able to redesign emergency systems to safeguard children's lives and well-being, by embedding a child-lens into their disaster mitigation strategies. Inclusive village-level provisions for families' preparedness plans in Kerala and child-friendly spaces in Assam's shelters, ensured continuity of care and safety during crises.⁴⁴ Their protocols acknowledged that children's needs such as continuity of care, psychological safety, access to familiar caregivers, must guide the architecture of crisis planning. This shift from reactive to anticipatory design illustrates how centering children can yield stronger, more humane disaster governance overall.⁴⁵

05

CORE DESIGN PILLAR

Child & Family
Competence

Life Skills | Mentorship | Aftercare

SIGNIFICANCE

Children too need help processing distress, regulating emotions, and building trust. Without this scaffolding of social and emotional competence, even well-resourced systems struggle to restore what was lost.

CORRESPONDING CHILD PROTECTION MODEL

The Make A Difference child protection model shows how understanding children's vulnerabilities can serve as a powerful design principle for effective interventions. Its age-transitional approach is structured around recognizing and programming for the developmental and psychosocial needs of children at every stage: building foundational skills in early adolescence (**10–13**), bridging learning gaps and shaping aspirations during teenage years (**14–16**), equipping older adolescents (**16–18**) with life skills and networks for adulthood, and finally offering mentorship and aftercare to support a stable, independent future.⁴⁶

3.2.2

Operating Requisites for Designing Child Protection Systems

01

Proximity

Shifting the site of protection from courts to everyday environments—playgrounds, classrooms, marketplaces, transport hubs and other community spaces, ensures that interventions are timely, accessible, and centered in children's worlds.³⁹

Educate Girls' Team Balika network leverages child protection as a diagnostic lens to understand why children, and especially girls drop out of school. Through intensive door-to-door outreach in underserved regions, trained community volunteers surface underlying drivers such as child labor, early marriage, and intra-household poverty.⁵⁷ Their follow-up ensures that girls not only return to school but stay enrolled, reframing education as a protective mechanism in crisis-affected communities and reducing intergenerational cycles of marginalization, catalyzing improvements in indicators like household income, health, and community resilience.

02 Agency

When children and caregivers co-create solutions, grievance channels become more accessible, shaping system design to anticipate harm before it occurs.

Karnataka, the Makkala Grama Sabhas (Children's Village Assemblies) launched by Concerned for Working Children and Bhima Sangha, show how child protection can reconfigure democratic processes. These assemblies provide a formal space where children voice the risks they face, from unsafe walking routes to schools to the pressures of early marriage or loss of scholarships. Integrating children's perspectives into local governance, the assemblies ensure that protection is not a peripheral concern but a central function of decision-making. This design shift transforms protection from a reactive service into a proactive, participatory practice, institutionalized within civic structures.

03 Prevention-First

Anticipating risks and acting long before a violation meets the legal thresholds for action demonstrates the design potential of child protection: when systems integrate early detection mechanisms, protection becomes woven into the fabric of education, governance, and community life.

In regions of Bihar and Rajasthan where child marriage rates were surging, **ActionAid's Anti-Child Marriage Grid** combined community organizing with institutional reforms. Early warning systems were embedded in school re-enrolment desks, digital literacy bridge courses, and girl-led "audit walks" that mapped local risks. It has positioned adolescent girls as active agents in linking community intelligence with formal structures, and evolved the grid into a model that government departments could adopt and sustain.

04 Integration

Planning for convergence across education, health, WASH and safety while creating a protective ecosystem for child protection goes a long way in integrated child development.

UNICEF India's kinship and community-based care model in Maharashtra represents a systemic innovation in the child protection landscape—shifting from reactive, institution-centric interventions to a preventive, ecosystem-oriented approach. Anchored in the socio-ecological determinants of child wellbeing, the program is designed to mitigate the adverse impacts of seasonal migration on children by embedding alternative care within existing kinship structures and enhancing convergence across government service delivery systems.

05 Trauma-informed & dignified

As a design principle, child protection has the potential to rewire institutions to be more humane, more accountable, and ultimately stronger for everyone they serve. When interventions are designed with children at the center, they become more accessible and effective for all stakeholders.

Karnataka's Child-Friendly Courtrooms exemplify how justice systems can be redesigned around children's lived experiences. Separate entrances, trauma-informed orientations, and sensitized judges transformed courtrooms from intimidating spaces into places of care. This architectural and procedural rethinking underscores that the justice system's credibility and effectiveness increase when it prioritizes children's dignity and well-being⁷⁰.

06

Data Minimization & Privacy

The rapid expansion of digital technologies presents a double-edged reality. While many children remain excluded from digital access altogether, others face escalating risks in poorly regulated online environments. Digital inequality compounds existing disparities in education, safety, and opportunity, while online exploitation and privacy breaches emerge as new frontiers of vulnerability.

CyberSmart's Digital Safety Curriculum in Madhya Pradesh embedded digital hygiene and protection into state school curricula through interactive lessons and quizzes, paired with an always-visible helpline. By integrating preventive skills at scale, it demonstrated how education systems can build children's resilience against emerging digital harms and ensured that children are able to navigate digital spaces safely, and that systems themselves evolve to address emerging forms of harm.⁶⁹

07

Localization

When local governments and CSOs work together, it enables data-driven case management and community-rooted implementation, which ultimately allows for better delivery of services through existing government schemes, accessed more effectively through a well-informed and better-coordinated system.

One of India's earliest institutional responses to child labor, the **National Child Labour Project (NCLP)**'s district-level rehabilitation programs spanning non-formal education, healthcare, and vocational training, uncover the structural drivers of child labor: poverty, debt bondage, and lack of access to schooling. Not only does NCLP break cycles of exploitation, but also it strengthens human capital and local economies, demonstrating how solving for child harm catalyzes broader social mobility.

3.3

Design and Diagnostic Implications for Child Protection Across Sectors

In India, the child protection ecosystem is best understood as a protective continuum of care, stretching from downstream responses to immediate harm, to midstream mechanisms for risk identification and service coordination, to upstream efforts focused on prevention and systemic reform.

Understanding child protection through this continuum enables deeper engagement with interconnected challenges, such as understanding how adjacent development sectors can draw on child protection's diagnostic insights and embed child-centric design in their own frameworks.

01

Climate change & Urbanization

Safe Evacuation | Child-Friendly Routes |
Lighting | Zoning | Continuity of
Schooling During Shocks

In the chaos of school closures and economic shocks during COVID-19, **Pratham mobilized 92,000 community volunteers** to deliver daily learning activities through **Digital Modules** via shared phones and WhatsApp groups to 12,800 communities. This design choice recognized that children's cognitive and emotional needs are intertwined, especially during crisis. It shows how educational continuity can be intentionally structured to mitigate psychological and physical harm, not merely learning loss.⁶⁶

02 Public Health

Integrated Mental Health | Referral Loops
| Mobile Outreach for Migrants

UNICEF's Balmitra Program's overarching goal is to create a protective ecosystem for children by enabling safe, family-based alternatives to migration through kinship care, while also strengthening service delivery and convergence across child protection, education, nutrition, and health systems, as more particularly explained in part B. Linking stay-back children to local entitlements such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, ICDS, school enrolment and psychosocial support, help to determine and strengthen the children's wellbeing.

03 Education

Attendance | Transition Tracking | Safe
Transport | Peer Support | Digital Safety
Modules

At its core, **Prerana's Elimination of Second-Generation Trafficking (ESGT)** (ESGT) is an approach of relational care and rights-based intervention, tailored for contexts of structural invisibility. It centers on the child's lived experience, treating them not as extensions of their parents or context, but as individuals with dignity, autonomy, and aspirations. Through its Educational Support Program (ESP), Prerana intervenes early to ensure school enrollment and retention, particularly for first-generation learners. Beyond academics, ESP builds life skills and confidence, creating pathways for children to reimagine their identity and independence. ESGT operates across a continuum: early identification; protection through community-based care services, documentation, and education; emotional scaffolding and long-term accompaniment, as more particularly explained in Chapter 5

04 Social Protection

Portable Entitlements | Emergency
Cash/Transfers | Grievance Redressal

Bihar's integration of **CPMIS** with the **CLTS**, supported by **UNICEF**, illustrates how child protection systems can diagnose and correct coordination failures between state bodies⁶³, as more particularly explained in part 3A. By assigning unique case IDs, tracking rehabilitation, and linking rescued children to entitlements via automated cards, the integrated system exposed and addressed systemic bottlenecks in access to support, providing a governance blueprint for tracking other marginalized groups, strengthening the state's ability to deliver entitlements efficiently.

05 Justice/ Administration

Child-Centred Procedures |
Time-Bound Decisions | Alternative
Care & Reintegration Pathways

In his judgment of a POCSO²⁹ case, Justice Surya Kant pointedly observed that a child cannot be treated merely as a witness in a trial, they are a person whose trauma calls for sustained, collective care.³⁰ Too often, the very process meant to deliver justice compounds the child's distress, suggesting that this is as much a failure of implementation alone as it is a structural gap in design. "The child's healing is not just a legal requirement-it is a moral obligation. In the Indian societal context, it is also a constitutional commitment," he said.

Gujarat's expansion of foster care support under the **Palak Mata Pita Yojana** is a model of embedding lived experience into child protection systems, because it engages different care-leaver boards in relevant decisions around foster placements. The program surfaced insights on what makes placements safe, stable, and dignified. This child-centered diagnostic approach contributed to a nine-fold increase in foster care placements between 2016–18.⁶² The resulting model is more responsive and accountable, with implications for other state-led welfare systems seeking to balance efficiency with dignity.

06 Digital Platforms

Age-Appropriate Design | Easy
Reporting | Rapid Takedown
| Parental Tools

Aarambh India's Reporting Portal developed with the Internet Watch Foundation addresses an emerging frontier of harm: the digital sphere, as more particularly explained in part 3A above. As India's first anonymous reporting mechanism for child sexual abuse material, it has illuminated patterns of online exploitation and revealed how abuse networks operate across jurisdictions, beyond just giving citizens a channel to report online abuse. This diagnostic intelligence brings law enforcement and tech companies closer to the problem, enabling stronger safeguards for children while building frameworks for digital safety that protect all users in an increasingly online society.

Children experience harm at every threshold of social life. Embedding child protection principles into adjacent domains like climate resilience, zoning laws and urban development, helps build trust, institutions and intergenerational resilience.



Community Meeting with Female Youth and Women



Life Skill ToT for the CFE partners and CCIs



Amravati VCPC training inauguration by the DLSA Secretary



Bal Panchayat Training Pune



Home visit and discussion with single parent mother on supporting documents needed to apply for support under Balsangopan scheme (Nandurbar)



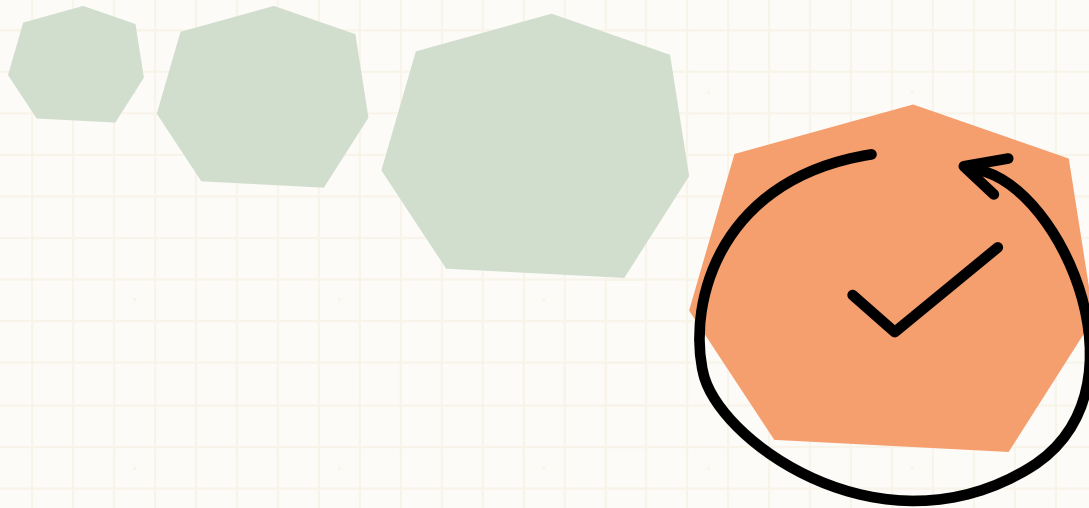
Anemia Checking Health Camp



Anemia Checking Health Camp



Role play Amravati VCPC training



Chapter 4

Futures Thinking: Scenarios for Child Protection in India

4.1

Understanding the Funding Landscape in India

Across the world, philanthropy has emerged as a catalytic force, addressing humanity's most pressing challenges. Yet this catalytic potential remains largely untapped at the intersection of child protection and other challenge areas.

While philanthropic funding often responds to emerging trends with agility, emerging challenges like climate volatility, rapid urbanization, digital expansion, economic precarity are reshaping the conditions of childhood in ways that are simultaneous, compounding, and fast-moving. Meeting them requires a level of pace, scale, and adaptability that far exceeds the current configuration of resources within the child protection ecosystem. Philanthropy, distinct from both public finance and market capital, is uniquely positioned to respond to this moment at the level of systems transformation. Its comparative advantage lies in four interlocking capabilities:

- ~ It can invest in endurance over immediacy, sustaining efforts where outcomes are diffuse, non-linear, and often generational.
- ~ It can underwrite risks and experimentation within the ecosystem, enabling new approaches to be tested, iterated, and refined without the pressure of short-term proof.

- ~ It can strengthen institutional memory and infrastructure, by bolstering data systems, leadership pipelines, and organizational resilience so that progress is enduring.
- ~ It can catalyze systems integration, through cross-sectoral collaboration across silos, embedding child protection within broader domains such as climate resilience, public health, education, and urban development.

In doing so, philanthropy can shift from being a responsive actor to a field-shaping force that helps reimagine how societies anticipate, prevent, and respond to harm in the lives of children.

4.2

Why Child Protection Remains Underfunded

Success Remains Hidden in Plain Sight

In child protection, success is often defined by what does not happen: a child not trafficked, a marriage averted, a family preserved, a crisis prevented. These outcomes are profound, yet inherently difficult to quantify or narrate. As a result, prevention struggles to compete with interventions that produce visible, countable outputs.

“How do you put a value? You can’t reduce it to numbers alone. You have to help donors understand that”

Vandhana Kandhari | UNICEF India

Overcoming the Barrier of Jargons

Child protection is frequently misunderstood or narrowly framed. Practitioners must often translate their work into adjacent themes such as mental health, education continuity, family wellbeing, to gain traction with funders. While these intersections are real, the need for constant reframing dilutes the sector’s core identity.

“When we say child protection, often people don’t know how to visualize it. The visual they have: either we’re on the streets with placards, or we’re writing policy papers and telling the government what to do. We have to unpack that.”

Kusum Mohapatra | Miracle Foundation India

Short-Termism

Protection is inherently long-term and relational. It depends on trust, continuity, and sustained engagement with children, families, and systems. However, most funding remains short-cycle and project-based, forcing organizations to align with funder timelines rather than the timelines of children’s lives.

“Not having sustained and assured long-term funding really hampers child protection work. Only by working long-term and building trust find cracks because of that. It’s very difficult to have continuity.”

Priti Patkar | Prerana

The Human Resource Gap

The human resource challenge may be the most underestimated constraint of all. A majority of the implementation challenges are tied to inadequate human resource capacity on the ground and insufficient support for people in the right places who make protection real.

“The child protection sector is, at its core, a human resource-intensive sector. Effective protection work requires trained, motivated, and well-supported frontline workers, case managers, community mobilisers, and legal aid providers.”

Nicole Menezes | Leher

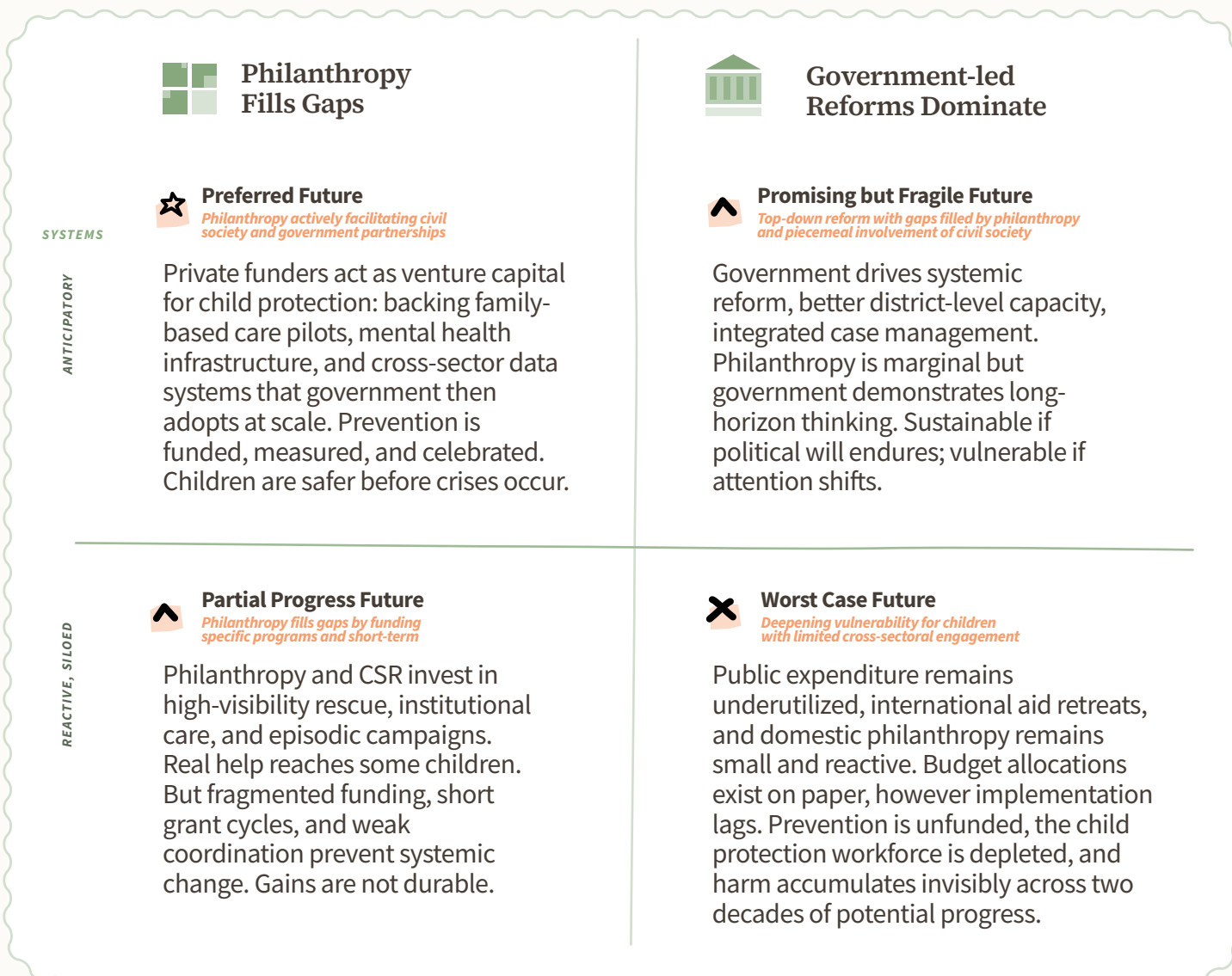
4.3

Futures Thinking: Scenarios for Child Protection

A key challenge in mobilizing resources for child protection is the difficulty of fitting its work into traditional models of public sector funding. Unlike education or immunization programs, child protection is not easily reduced to linear inputs and measurable outputs. Such complexity makes child protection more vulnerable to underinvestment. Therefore, philanthropy has a dual mandate: to bridge urgent financial gaps in supporting the needs and challenges of children and to catalyze the non-profit efforts that strengthen implementation and innovations within the child protection ecosystem.

Domestic philanthropy is well suited become the primary funding engine for child protection in India. With its flexibility and long-term orientation, it is uniquely positioned to invest in the kind of foundational, preventive infrastructure that public budgets often overlook: systems that identify and respond to vulnerability, that enable frontline workers, and that protect children from intergenerational harm. The funding choices made in the next few years will determine whether India builds genuinely anticipatory child protection systems, or whether it remains trapped in a reactive posture, perpetually catching children after they have already fallen.

Whether domestic philanthropy can rise to the occasion, will depend on two factors. The first is whether funders embrace anticipatory, systems-thinking approaches to child protection, or continue to fund reactive, siloed responses. The second is whether domestic philanthropy and CSR can work collaboratively, with the CSOs as well as the public infrastructure, to strengthen scalable and sustainable solutions. **Mapping these factors produces four plausible futures:**



A resilient India requires a resilient child protection system. One that is well-financed, embedded in mainstream development, and backed by a culture of compassion. **What then, should catalytic funding towards child protection look like? How can philanthropy strategically strengthen child protection efforts and systems in India?**

4.4

A World Reimagined: Five Calls to Action for Domestic Philanthropy

01 Invest in Systemic Architecture, Including Its People

It means investing in the structures, capacities, and processes that allow child protection outcomes to survive individual programs and individual funders. This includes government capacity development at district and sub-district levels; legal and policy reform; data and information systems; and the human resource infrastructure that keeps government and civil society functioning.

- ~ Fund multi-year workforce development programs: training, mentoring, and support for child protection workers in both government and civil society sectors.
- ~ Advocate within your own organizations for full labor law compliance in grant budgets, and extend that expectation to partner organizations.
- ~ Support knowledge management and data systems: the sector cannot make the case for prevention without longitudinal, population-level evidence. Fund the infrastructure to generate it.

02 Prioritize Community-Led Family and Child Safety Models

The evidence from decades of practice is now unambiguous: children thrive in families, and families thrive in communities. Domestic funders should actively redirect resources toward community-based models that are rights-based rather than charity-based, that build community capacity rather than community dependency, and that locate the child within the ecological reality of their family and social network rather than abstracting them as an isolated beneficiary.

- ~ Invest in scaling proven community-based models: night care centers, community protection committees, family-based alternative care, community case management.
- ~ Resist the pull toward institution funding even when it is easier to justify. The institutional care system is expensive and does not deliver the protective outcomes it promises.
- ~ Apply a family lens across all child-related programming: children's safety is inseparable from family stability, which is inseparable from livelihood security, housing, and social protection access.

03 Catalyze Cross-Sector Ownership and Collaborations

The conditions that make children unsafe are produced and reproduced across multiple sectors. Schools, health systems, climate programs, urban planners, and law enforcement all intersect with children's protection daily. Child protection cannot remain the exclusive mandate of child protection organizations.

- ~ Use multi-year grants to incentivize cross-sector program design: fund proposals that require a health partner, an education partner, or a livelihood partner to co-own child protection outcomes.
- ~ Commission and fund evidence on the child protection dimensions of adjacent sectors: climate-driven migration, urban vulnerability, digital harm. Make the data visible so other sectors cannot claim ignorance.
- ~ Consider funding positions dedicated to mainstreaming child protection into sectoral systems and institutions

04 Shift the Narrative Toward Collective Responsibility

A generational narrative shift is required: from child protection as a welfare service for children at risk, to child safety as a collective responsibility that every institution, every community, and every funder shares. This narrative shift must be honest about violence, while also expansive in how it defines protection.

- ~ Fund narrative and communications infrastructure: the sector cannot shift public discourse without investment in high-quality, locally resonant storytelling. Communication has become politically sensitive, but it is essential to behavior change.
- ~ Engage faith-based organizations, community leaders, and local political actors as child protection stakeholders. These institutions have reach and trust that NGOs do not; their inclusion is not optional.
- ~ Frame child protection as an investment in Viksit Bharat: children who grow up safe and supported become economically productive, socially contributing adults. This framing speaks to nationalist priorities and the economic imagination of domestic HNIs without abandoning the rights framework.

05 Strengthening and Sustaining Prevention Measures

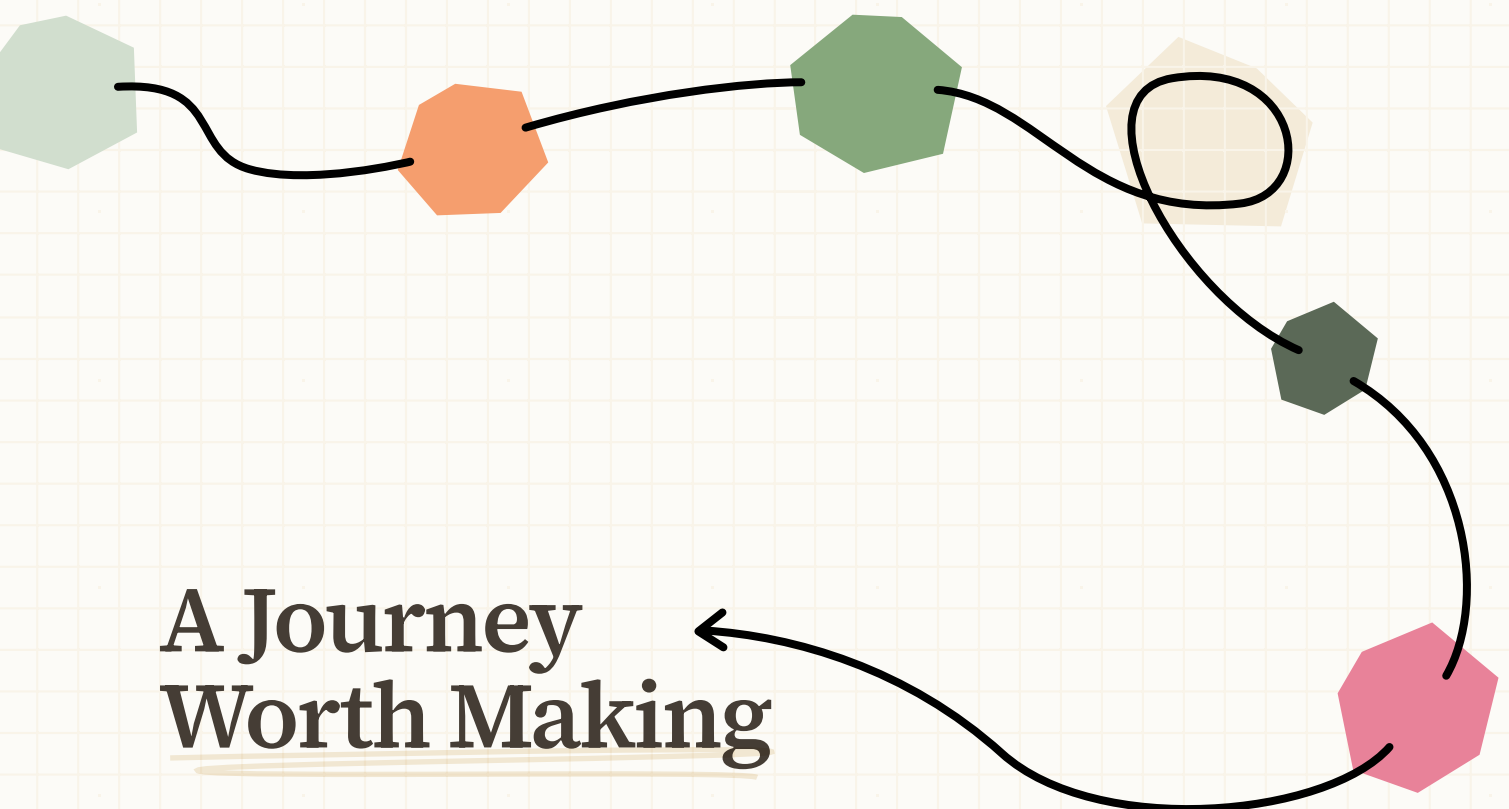
Children's rights can only be safeguarded when the systems around them are anticipatory, integrated, and robust enough to withstand overlapping crises. This is a compelling challenge to policymakers, practitioners, and funders: to recognize that today's crises are interconnected and to design responses with the same level of interdependence.

- ~ Name prevention explicitly in your funding strategy. A grant to community family support is a prevention investment; call it that, measure it as that, and defend it as that.
- ~ Invest in the evidence infrastructure for prevention: longitudinal tracking, population-level data, and independent evaluation. Without evidence, prevention will always lose the budget argument to crisis response.
- ~ Fund intermediaries and knowledge networks that can effectively enable prevention learning to travel across geographies and organizations.

What if we began at the root?

“Theorizing practice and practicing theory are both important,” says Nilima Mehta, **Child Protection and Adoption Advisor**, and one of the most respected figures in India's child protection landscape. “Every worker in a system is hyper-focused on procedure, losing sight of what's right in front of them.” The task before us is to protect the “future citizen,” and also to safeguard the present, ensuring that every decision taken today reflects a commitment to their rights, dignity & agency.

The call to action, therefore, is for funders to recognize child safety as foundational development infrastructure as essential, in its way, as roads, schools, or electricity. No single institution can do this work alone. Policymakers must legislate with children in mind. CSOs must innovate and implement. Academics must theorize practice, and practice theory. And philanthropy, with its patient capital, must invest in long-term systems change. Each generation inherits the vulnerabilities of the one before it, along with its own novel risks. What child protection teaches us is that when vulnerabilities compound, so must our protections. Building systems that are relational, coordinated, and historically aware is the most strategic investment we can make in an uncertain world, and it is the smartest way to future-proof a world worth building.



A Journey Worth Making

Tommaso Vitale, a sociologist at Sciences Po, once said that when we imagine a child navigating a city, it challenges us to reimagine everything: crossings, transit, lighting, air quality, housing.²⁸ It invites a diagnostic gaze. It forces us to ask: if this doesn't work for a child, who else is it failing? A child-friendly city is also a caregiver-friendly city, a disabled-accessible city, a climate-resilient city. It's not radical, then, to ask whether children should shape how we think about education, public space, the environment. In this way, designing for children becomes a proxy for designing for equity.

Why don't we build the world with children in mind? The answer lies partly in how we see them: as becomings, not beings—adults-in-waiting, citizens of tomorrow. As a result, children are too often left out of conversations about infrastructure, healthcare, public design, and environmental planning—as if these domains are too complex for them, or too distant from their lives.

Addressing children's vulnerability requires steadiness, even when the center of gravity in child protection continues to shift, from street children to child laborers, to adopted children, to those in need of alternative care. But real progress is cumulative, not cyclical. It builds from institutional memory, sustains momentum, and carries learning forward. Enakshi Ganguly, co-founder of HAQ and current Executive Director of Housing and Land Right Network notes, ***"Everybody cannot keep mining at the bottom, or responding to trends. We must continue to study and build on what has been done."***

Perhaps the answers we seek about resilience, sustainability, and equity don't begin with an overhaul. Perhaps they begin with the smallest bodies in the most fragile systems. And from there, radiate outward.

- + **Child protection compels us to adopt a vulnerability radar—one that asks what kind of society allows children to be harmed in the first place. It resists technocratic detachment and instead proposes the approach that prioritizes safety for the most vulnerable.**
- + **The ecosystem in India demonstrates the opportunity to leverage the true potential of proximity. When frontline workers, caregivers, legal aid providers, teachers, and local officials work together, the result is efficient, but because it is the only way to sustain change.**
- + **Child protection teaches us that interconnected problems demand interconnected solutions: the health of a child cannot be separated from housing, from education, from livelihood, from caste, gender, and climate. It insists on wholeness, in a system built to fragment.**
- + **The sector further understands that safety is a crucial precondition for all sustainable development. Safeguarding a child today is a seeding of futures: when we invest in psychosocial support, community resilience, or institutional accountability, we are nurturing ecosystems that self-correct, families that stay together, and communities that become safer by design. This is intergenerational impact.**
- + **Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the sector’s nuanced frameworks insist that power must rest with those most affected. Whether through children’s collectives, youth-led advocacy, or participatory planning processes, community participation is the engine of transformation.**

Across India, NEEV partners have been doing just that: building durable, context-specific solutions in spaces. Whether it is enabling kinship-based care models for children outside of parental support, strengthening decentralized social welfare mechanisms, or using data to track and prevent trafficking, their work represents some of the most insightful and grounded innovations in the child protection landscape today.

This section highlights their interventions—not as isolated “best practices,” but as case studies that document how child protection work must constantly adapt to shifting terrains of vulnerability, policy, and need. Each case is an invitation on a journey worth making: to learn, to collaborate, to see child protection as a cross-cutting approach that holds relevance for anyone working on gender equity, education, health, urban planning, or climate adaptation. Consider them as entry points, into a deeper conversation about how we build systems that center care, anticipate harm, and refuse to treat any child’s well-being as negotiable.

01

Leher

Bal Suraksha Hubs

GEOGRAPHY

Maharashtra

FOCUS

+ Community-led
Child Protection+ Local Governance
Integration+ Systemic
Prevention

Leher's Bal Suraksha Hub is a community-led, systems-based model for preventive child protection. It operationalizes two core levers at the village level: Village Child Protection Committees (VCPCs) and Children's Groups (CGs). These institutions are capacitated to identify vulnerabilities, escalate risks, and engage directly with panchayats and service delivery mechanisms. Through structured routines, evidence-informed tools, and integration into local governance, the model embeds child protection as a cross-cutting agenda within broader development planning.

Reframing Child Protection as a Preventive, Community-Led Mandate

Leher is a child rights organization that has worked across urban and rural India, to strengthen child protection systems through community engagement, public advocacy, and policy reform. With deep roots in the establishment and scale-up of Childline 1098, Leher has long focused on ensuring that children are not just protected after harm occurs, but meaningfully supported within their families and communities.

This mission came into sharp focus during the national shift away from institutional care toward family- and community-based alternatives. As government policies emphasized de-institutionalization and gatekeeping, Leher observed a troubling gap: there was no reliable ground-level infrastructure to support vulnerable children in real time. While statutory mechanisms like VCPCs and CGs existed on paper, they were largely inactive. And in the absence of a functioning safety net at the community level, even the best policy shifts risked failing in practice.

“The child protection system as it existed, really reached only a drop in the ocean of children who were in distress. They were either falling out of their community safety nets or into situations of harm. That was the push — to say we need solutions that are closer to the family, to the community, so that we can prevent the emergency in the first place.”

Leher made a deliberate choice, to activate and empower existing institutions, and to invest in building a shared sense of responsibility for children's safety and well-being within communities themselves, which then became the foundation for the Bal Suraksha Hub (BSH) model. Designed as a governance-aligned framework, BSH transforms VCPCs and CGs into the primary infrastructure for child protection, rooted in community empowerment, and aligned with the full spectrum of services children need.

Embedding Protections to Empower the Bal Suraksha Hub

Leher's founding team's past work with Childline and in areas such as Nandurbar and Mumbai Suburban revealed that dormant statutory structures like VCPCs and CGs, could be activated through consistent facilitation and community trust-building.

“We didn't want to create more parallel systems. We said, let's strengthen the VCPCs... bring community participation, children's voices, the voices of families into the center of discourse—so that small actions at the village level snowball over time into a larger social fabric and systems change.”

BSH is held together by three interdependent principles:

- + **Care as Collective Responsibility:** Protection is positioned as a shared civic task. VCPCs and CGs identify risks, track vulnerable children, support scheme access, and present issues in gram sabhas. The goal is not to replace the state, but to equip communities to activate it.
- + **Children at the Center:** Children are not passive beneficiaries; they are participants in governance. CGs regularly surface issues such as dropout, safety, and gender equity, and work with VCPCs to propose solutions. In several districts, CGs have directly influenced decisions on school infrastructure and teacher appointments.
- + **Integration with Public Systems:** BSH is designed for integrating into government architecture. VCPCs are trained to fulfil their mandate under the Juvenile Justice framework and participate in Gram Panchayat Development Planning. The model connects with health, education, and social welfare systems to address the full spectrum of children's needs. These actions are designed for building collective observation, shared accountability, active problem-solving, and importantly, reframing protection as a distributed practice of care, power-sharing, and participation, led by children and communities, and connected to the systems that surround them.

Operationalizing Prevention Through Local Institutions and Communities

Currently, BSH is operational across 139 communities in six districts of Maharashtra, with Leher having direct implementation presence in two districts and collaborations in four. Its implementation rests on five interdependent components that translate the model's principles into community-led action:

- ~ **Community-Led Committees:** The model is anchored in two statutory bodies:
 - + VCPCs, composed of panchayat leaders, health workers, teachers, and parents
 - + CGs, with 10–20 adolescents from diverse backgrounds

Both committees meet monthly to identify and act on local protection risks—including child marriage, school dropout, substance use, sanitation, and mobile overuse. CGs also lead mapping exercises to identify unsafe areas, vulnerable households, and peer risks that often go unreported. Jointly, the committees conduct home visits to follow up on school attendance, flag emerging vulnerabilities, and support families in accessing schemes such as Balsangopan and Manodhairya.

- ~ **A Structured, Repeatable Operating Cycle:** Each monthly meeting follows a structured process:
 - + Risk identification using participatory tools (e.g., 3-cloud exercise, community mapping)
 - + Household follow-ups and issuing documentation
 - + Joint problem-solving and planning
 - + Escalation to panchayats, block officials, or district actors when needed

This workflow has enabled VCPCs and CGs to not only respond to individual cases, but to raise collective concerns in public platforms like gram sabhas, often leading to concrete actions on issues such as school infrastructure, toilets, and teacher appointments.

Leher's field facilitators provide process support, monthly coaching, and help committees navigate block- and district-level systems. Their role is intentionally light touch, designed to foster autonomy and ensure that committees remain functional. Facilitators also support community-facing strategies such as exhibitions, street plays, and awareness drives.

“Facilitators conducted home visits, sat with women to understand their routines... these seemingly simple acts paved the way for trust.”

In tribal districts like Nandurbar, the team addresses resistance to documentation through trust-building. In urban informal settlements like Mumbai Suburban, work is anchored in informal governance actors (e.g., temple caretakers, local political affiliates). In fragile systems, district platforms like the DCPU, CWCs, even BDOs are leveraged to strengthen legitimacy and ensure follow-through. Leher also adapts its several toolkits for cultural specificity: toolkits in multiple languages incorporating local folklore and cultural elements presented through audio-video format in Kashmir, Odisha and Maharashtra.

The Bhosa Story: Collaboration as a Structural Lever

While the model is anchored in community-owned action, its ability to drive lasting outcomes hinges on its capacity to activate coordination and collaboration across institutions. A case in Bhosa village, Yavatmal, demonstrated this in practice.

Two young sisters, orphaned and at risk of being pushed into unsafe caregiving, were not identified by formal systems, but by a local Nagar Sevak sensitized through Leher's work. The response was immediate: the VCPC convened, facilitated by Leher's team; Childline was activated; and a case was escalated to the CWC. Within weeks, the children were placed in a safe shelter, enrolled in school, and reconnected with their extended family.

This case surfaced three key insights:

- + VCPCs can operate as coordination platforms, connecting village actors to district-level protection systems.
- + Local leadership responds when sensitized and embedded in community routines.
- + Institutional escalation is possible without dependency, when community structures are equipped to navigate the system.

“It was thanks to the alertness of the Nagar Sevak that got the VCPC involved, and the continued support to the aunt helped the two children from falling through the safety net.” Since Bhosa, similar patterns have repeated across sites, in child marriage prevention, disability certification, and access to entitlements, thus confirming that multi-actor collaboration is not incidental, but core to how the BSH is designed to function.

Strengthening Protection Systems, Informing Evidence-Based Practice

Numbers are not the only way Leher understands the impact and success of their programs. They measure it by asking a more difficult question: what shifts in a community when children are safer not because someone intervened, but because everyone cared sooner?

The answer for Leher has been to look at structural, not symbolic change, like the village that now brings child protection into its development plans, the CPC member who writes to the corporator unprompted, the child who presents at the gram sabha, the field facilitator who steps back because the community stepped forward.

“Our milestones weren’t of great achievements—they were milestones of struggle. We have to stay in it long enough until it starts to work.”

Taking this long-term view was a deliberate decision, as the model treats protection not as an intervention to be delivered, but as a practice to be normalized. With time, that normalization becomes visible in profound ways:

- + **139 communities across six districts** are holding monthly VCPC and CG meetings, focused on child protection risks and local response.
- + **Over 2,000 children** have participated in structured CG activities, including safety mapping, gender equity sessions, and civic engagement.
- + **160 out-of-school children** were identified, with over 80% re-enrolled following home visits and community follow-up.
- + **24 villages** have successfully presented child protection priorities in gram sabhas, resulting in direct panchayat action on issues ranging from substance use to school infrastructure.
- + Committees have enabled access to schemes for dozens of children and families including **Manodhairya, Balsangopan, and disability entitlements.**

BSH’s real strength lies in how evidence is used, not just collected. Leher’s MEL system is designed to drive real-time learning and adaptation, not just accountability. Insights from community tools and monthly data are systematically reviewed through field coaching and internal cycles to inform programmatic adjustments on the ground.

Crucially, the MEL framework captures behavioural and systemic shifts often missed in traditional metrics, such as growing confidence in escalation, increased participation in local governance, and a shift in who initiates protection action. Facilitators are trained to document these patterns using standardized observation protocols, building an evidence base that reflects both impact and ownership.

“Through these regular CPC meetings, the members have developed skills in communication, escalation of issues, and dialogue building... They have been able to escalate issues to the block level and negotiate with the panchayat for local solutions like clean drinking water, fan installations, and school sanitation.”

Scaling Community-Owned Protection Through System Integration

The future of BSH lies in absorption – it being integrated into public systems, and adapted by civil society actors. Much of this work has already begun and is gaining momentum. A milestone came in 2023, when Leher partnered with UNICEF and the Government of Maharashtra to scale the BSH model across the state. Drawing on its field-tested tools and facilitation methods, Leher co-developed a state-wide VCPC training package that has now reached over 40,000 committees. These tools ranging from audio-visual modules to participatory exercises have been institutionalized within the state’s child protection training framework. This collaboration further validated a core design principle of the model: that community-driven protection can be codified, scaled, and delivered through state systems without losing its participatory edge. The BSH model does not expand through organizational footprint, it has scaled through public infrastructure.

Looking ahead, Leher envisions BSH as integral to local governance, embedded within Gram Panchayats to influence planning, service delivery, and coordination. Expanding the idea of protection to include well-being, BSH is being positioned as a cross-sectoral civic platform, not a standalone intervention. **“We want to embed in the Gram Panchayats, reach 170 million children, and expand the definition of child protection to include health, education, mental health, and livelihoods. That’s when our model will be complete.”**

As it continues to inform national-level platforms such as Childline 3.0, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) child tracking framework, and the evolution of decentralized protection systems, the model’s long-term value will lie in enabling communities to lead consistently on protection, supported by state systems that are responsive, coordinated, and accountable.

02

Miracle Foundation India

Thrive Scale and PRI–CBO–LG Compact

GEOGRAPHY

Multi-state, Rural
and Semi-Urban

FOCUS

+ Family Strengthening
+ Data-driven Case Management

+ Systems
Integration

The Thrive Scale™ methodology developed by Miracle Foundation is helping rewire how India’s child protection system sees, understands, and supports vulnerable families. At a time when the sector is moving away from institutionalization toward holistic, community-rooted alternatives, Thrive Scale offers a way to act early — using data to surface hidden risks, strengthen families, and prevent unnecessary separation before it happens.

Miracle Foundation India’s Journey From Service Delivery to Systems Thinking

Miracle Foundation, which began in 2000 with a focus on improving Child Care Institutions (CCIs) -based care, recognized this paradigm shift and in 2018 pivoted its strategy toward preventative Family Strengthening and Family-Based Alternative Care. Miracle Foundation India, registered as a not-for-profit organization in 2011, led the implementation of this strategic shift.

This transition was guided by three key insights:

- ~ Need for institutional care often stems from systemic vulnerabilities, not the absence of caregiving intent.
- ~ Systemic inefficiencies limit early identification of at-risk families.
- ~ There is a lack of standardized, actionable tools to support frontline decision-making on family care.

Rather than relying on broad or assumption-based labels like “at risk” or “vulnerable,” the Thrive Scale methodology was created to measure five key domains of a family’s capacity to care for a child: household economy, living conditions, health and mental health, education, and family and social relationships. This score-based system helps child protection actors, especially those embedded in governments, to design and implement interventions where it’s needed most, and to track change over time.

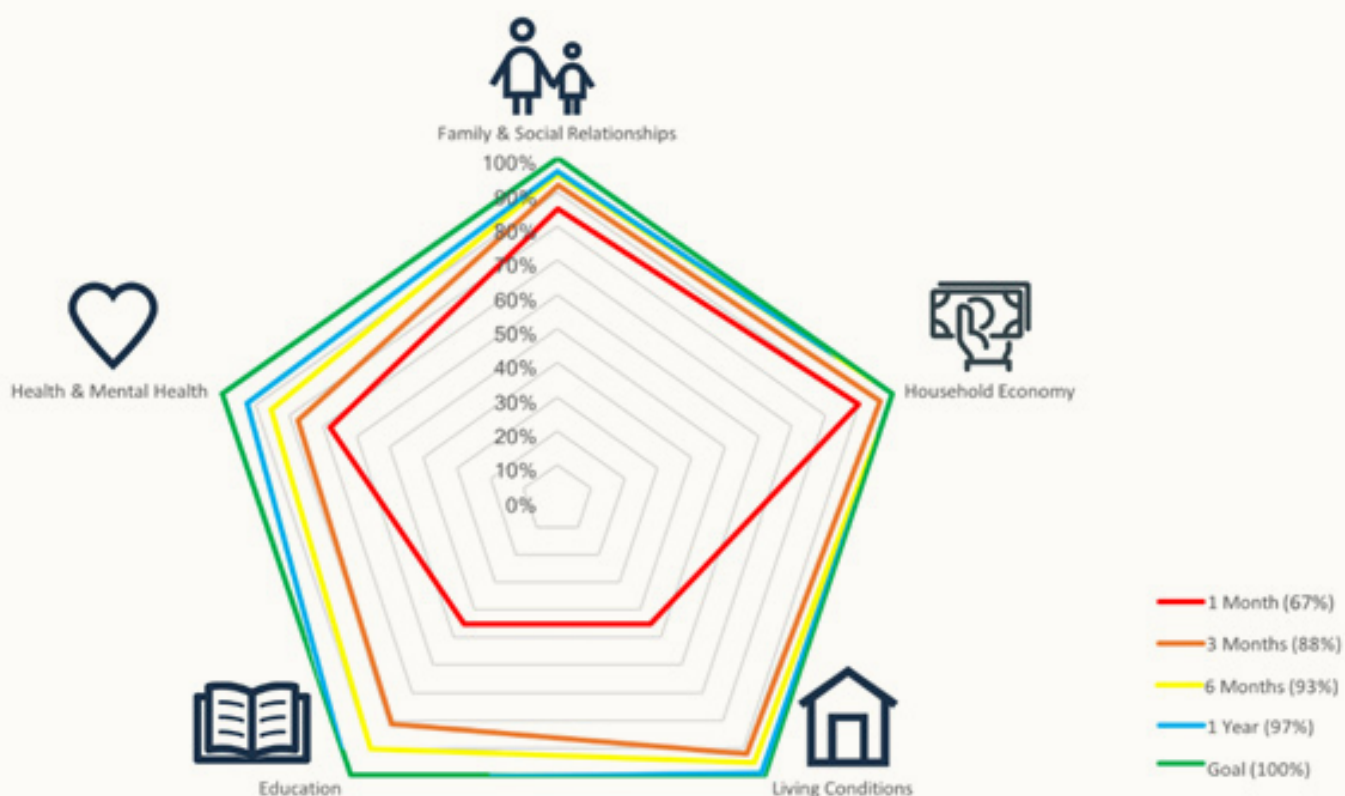
Simba's Story: A Data-driven Reintegration Parable

“Children not coming to the institution doesn’t mean that children are safe. That’s when we realized we had to work with the system — to help it see what it wasn’t seeing.” The story of a young boy named Simba (name changed) hailing from Tamil Nadu, shows what this approach looks like in practice. After his father was killed in a violent dispute, Simba’s mother was left with no steady income or social support. She had no choice but to place him in a CCI while she struggled to support herself and her younger son. But the separation was emotional, both mother and child remained deeply connected, even as the system offered no structured path to bring them back together.

For Miracle and its local partner, the challenge was visible but hard to act on: the child was ready to return, the mother was willing and able, but there was no reliable way to assess whether the family environment could safely support reintegration, or what exactly needed to be strengthened to make that possible. Here entered the Thrive Scale tool.

In order to ensure that every child thrives in a family, Miracle Foundation’s methodology for prevention and reintegration is operationalized through the Thrive Scale tool which allows identifying red flags (safety concerns), understands the specific needs of the child and family, and measures progress at every stage of the case management process. It pinpoints which of the domains one should prioritize on. It creates objectivity to the statement of vulnerability, and tells you where to focus, what to focus on, and how to measure whether your intervention is working. The Thrive Scale tool also monitors and evaluates the quality of prevention and reintegration of children’s progress over time.

The family’s specific vulnerabilities were assessed, and local actors and Miracle together co-created solutions. The scores from the assessment highlighted critical deficits in economic security, housing, and education. Working in collaboration with panchayat representatives and district officials, the team facilitated linkages to existing government schemes including house repair, a cow was provided to enable dairy-based regular income, agricultural support improved stability, and educational access was ensured for both children.



Over time, the family's situation improved, and by 2020, Simba returned home. He went on to score 91% in his board exams and gain admission to Anna University, one of South India's top engineering colleges. His brother, who had remained at home, also continued in school. This case is not only about Simba's family's personal resilience, but it is also a demonstration of how data can humanize systems, helping us see not just where families are struggling, but how frontline actors can respond with precision, dignity, and trust in their capacity to care.

“Systemic change starts with recognizing patterns in individual cases. When you handle hundreds of cases, you begin to see typologies emerge — clusters that can be approached with method and consistency. Like a doctor who, over years of practice, can diagnose in minutes, social workers too can gain that clarity with Thrive Scale. The right tools bring objectivity to that experience, helping turn practice into precision.”

Gujarat Story: Translating Scores into Systemic Response

The Thrive Scale methodology is an integral part of a working model which Miracle has been designing and activating since 2018. It enables data-driven case management, government partnership, and community-rooted implementation. Its strength also lies in how it is embedded into the local systems. What makes the methodology work is not simply the ability to generate scores, but how those scores translate into targeted support, trigger action across institutions, and restructure how care is understood and delivered.

The assessment is conducted through the Thrive Well app, a mobile-based interface that enables child protection workforce and frontline actors, including those in panchayats, VCPCs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) etc., to input data, visualize a family's baseline, and track change over time to guide individualized family care plans. The whole structure abides by the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP Act, 2023), consent is part of the system and Miracle Foundation only aggregates data relevant for programmatic inference. Importantly, the overall interventions are owned by the district administration, with Miracle Foundation acting as a facilitator rather than a funder or direct implementer. The programs are delivered through existing government schemes, accessed more effectively through a well-informed and better-coordinated system.

The PRI–CBO–LG Compact Story: Anchoring the Thrive Scale

This ability to use data for scheme entitlements of families is critical to the model's scalability. It is made possible by the **PRI–CBO–Local Government Compact**, a configuration of trained community and state actors who run the process on the ground. Miracle Foundation India has intentionally positioned itself as a technical partner, not an implementer, ensuring the model remains sustainable, system-owned, and embedded within existing governance structures. This triad enables seamless delivery by distributing responsibilities across local stakeholders:

- ~ **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** ensure political and administrative ownership
- ~ **Community-Based Organizations** provide last-mile support and community engagement
- ~ **Local government actors** (e.g., ASHAs, Anganwadi workers) manage assessments and interventions with the families

Establishing the PRI–CBO–Local Government Compact begins with aligning state intent and system readiness. In Gujarat, this started with:

- ~ Conducting a situational analysis to map child protection vulnerabilities and assess readiness of Panchayats, VCPCs, and CBOs.
- ~ Evaluated ecosystem openness to collaboration and institutional capacity for implementation.
- ~ Secured a Letter of Intent from the district administration, formalizing government ownership of the Thrive Scale model.
- ~ Government actors nominated specific geographies for rollout and identified key frontline actors.
- ~ Trained ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, Panchayat members, and local CSOs on the Thrive Scale framework.
- ~ Enabled government-led assessments and quarterly review meetings, often chaired by the DCPU, to monitor progress and reinforce accountability.

Using Data and Technology as an Enabler

The above model was first experimented with at two Gram Panchayats in Vadodara district. Success of this led to neighboring Panchayats being interested in supporting the model in their own jurisdiction. Next, 2 nearby districts, Mahesana and Chota Udepur, followed, and formal demand-led partnerships began to take shape. In a noteworthy recognition of leadership and innovation, Block Development Officer (BDO) of Desar block, Vadodara district, who has been closely associated with Miracle Foundation India's initiative since January 2024, was awarded Best Block Development Officer on March 25, 2025, by the District Panchayat of Vadodara. Selected from among nine blocks, this award highlights not only individual leadership but also the collective commitment of Desar's local administration to child protection. Amplifying the initiative's visibility, BDO of Desar block also presented the project's progress in the DISHA (District Initiative for Socio-economic and Holistic Advancement) Committee, which includes the MLAs and MPs of Vadodara district. The initiative was widely appreciated by all members.

While the model rests on a common foundation, its application has remained intentionally flexible, adapting to the governance structures, institutional strengths, and frontline realities of each context. In one state, for instance, where the childcare system is relatively well-developed and CCIs are more prevalent, the Thrive methodology is being used primarily as a reintegration planning tool, helping gatekeeping actors identify families where reunification is possible, and spotlighting risks that could delay or compromise a safe return home. What began as a single reintegration story has become a government-anchored pathway to reform in Gujarat. But at the heart of this model is a robust Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework, which helps institutions use data to track progress, identify blind spots, and course-correct in real time.

“Instead of asking whether the impact can be attributed to a single program, we should focus on the contributions made by communities and local governments. Impact emerges from collective effort — not from isolating causal links, but from recognizing the shared ownership of outcomes.”

Miracle's MEL approach tracks how different system actors collectively shape outcomes by shifting from individual interventions to pattern recognition and adaptive learning. The model is now evolving as a platform for continuous learning, proving that when data, dignity, and decentralized action come together, child protection transforms.

The Thrive Scale is a tool designed to enable better decision-making in child protection and family strengthening. While it is not a governance tool by design, its application has sparked interest in its potential for broader systemic use in other states. Alongside the PRI–CBO–Local Governance Compact, the Thrive Scale is increasingly being viewed not just as a protection framework, but also as a governance enabler. Its core principles are gaining relevance across sectors such as education, health and mental health, and household economy, pointing toward a future of cross-sectoral convergence and decentralized decision-making at the frontline. The team at Miracle sees its role as building capacities that outlive projects, not scaling programs, rather deepening resonance.

03

Prerana

Elimination of Second-Generation Trafficking

GEOGRAPHY

Mumbai and
Maharashtra

FOCUS

+ Intergenerational
Protection

+ System-Integrated
Prevention

Prerana’s flagship model, Elimination of Second-Generation Trafficking (ESGT) is a pioneering framework that reframes child protection as a proactive, rights-based system of care. Designed to disrupt cycles of inherited vulnerability, ESGT prioritizes prevention over rescue, and on early intervention in communities where exploitation is normalized, operating across a continuum that includes identification, shelter, documentation, education, psychosocial care, and long-term accompaniment into adulthood.

A Continuum Model for Breaking Cycles of Harm

When Prerana was established in 1986, global attention to child rights was upcoming, yet critical gaps persisted closer to home. In red-light areas like Kamathipura and Falkland Road, children were not peripheral to harm but embedded in cycles of exploitation: girls socialized to replace their mothers who were victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, boys disappearing from systems altogether or being groomed to be inducted into allied activities of the sex trade.²⁵

UNICEF’s Child Protection Strategy emphasizes the need to prioritize interventions for children “at greatest risk of child protection violations.”²⁶ Prerana recognized that for the most vulnerable children, these interventions often come too late. The realization that protection must begin well before harm occurs became the foundation of their Elimination of Second-Generation Trafficking (ESGT) model, which repositions protection as a proactive and preventive responsibility.

Understanding the Core Principles and Implementation of ESGT Model

At its core, ESGT is an approach of relational care and rights-based intervention, tailored for contexts of structural invisibility. It centers on the child’s lived experience, treating them not as extensions of their parents or context, but as individuals with dignity, autonomy, and aspirations.

The model operates across a continuum 01early identification; 02protection through community-based care services, 03documentation, and education; 04emotional scaffolding; 05long-term accompaniment

Operating on the following core principles:

- ~ **Child-first lens:** Interventions are shaped by a child's experience, not by external issue categories.
- ~ **Prevention as default:** Prioritizes upstream preventive action over post-harm rescue.
- ~ **Support, not stigma:** Engages mothers as partners in protection, not sources of risk.
- ~ **Inclusion by design:** Targets communities typically excluded from protection systems.
- ~ **Continuity matters:** Emphasizes long-term emotional safety and casework.

“We realized that child protection is a continuum — because if we don’t take the right steps post-rescue, we’ll find children being re-trafficked, losing faith in the support system. We also saw how, even in civil society, children were being picked and chosen, deciding who was ‘worthy’ of protection. That pushed us to amplify child rights and child protection as universal.”

What makes ESGT's principles tangible is a constellation of interlinked interventions, each representing a dimension of prevention, accompaniment, and restoration. These components do not function in isolation but operate as part of an integrated continuum.

- + **Children are first anchored through Night Care Centers (NCCs)** — evening spaces that provide structured routines, emotional safety, meals, and adult relationships free of violence or exploitation. These centers serve as a critical upstream shield, especially during the hours when children are most vulnerable to grooming or neglect, ensuring the children are in a safe space and have supervised care.
- + **Education forms the second pillar. Through its Educational Support Program (ESP)**, Prerana intervenes early to ensure school enrollment and retention, particularly for first-generation learners. Beyond academics, ESP builds life skills and confidence, creating pathways for children to reimagine their identity and independence.
- + For those living in unsafe or highly volatile environments, Prerana's **Institutional Placement Program (IPP)** offers a structured alternative. IPP is not simply a placement mechanism, but a personalized recovery journey that includes post-placement follow-up, mentorship, and family reintegration planning, extending well into adulthood. It also focuses on building capacity as a parent or caregiver.
- + Recognizing that trauma is both emotional and systemic, **ESGT includes dedicated health and psychosocial support**. Children and their caregivers access routine medical services, HIV/TB treatment, and therapeutic counseling, strengthening resilience and restoring dignity.
- + **Legal identity is treated as foundational**. Prerana systematically facilitates access to documentation and citizenship rights, ensuring children can obtain Aadhaar cards, ration cards, and orphan certificates, opening a gateway to education, state entitlements, and civic participation.
- + **Another crucial element is parenting transformation**. In contexts where parenting is involuntary or survival-driven, Prerana facilitates intergenerational dialogue and empathy-based training. Mothers, many of whom are survivors themselves, are supported to move from punitive or disengaged caregiving toward nurturing, relational parenting.
- + **What really binds ESGT together is its caseworker-led continuum**. Each child is accompanied by a trained professional, who is a service coordinator having a consistent, trusted presence. Caseworkers are equipped in trauma-informed care, rights-based approaches, and systems navigation, ensuring that protection is not episodic but sustained.

“One of the most important skills we need today is the ability to keep learning. No matter how much experience you bring, the moment you enter a new context or organization, you’re starting again. Just as critical is understanding the full case management system — knowing what resources exist, how to mobilize them, and how to recognize a family’s strengths. That kind of insight comes through close observation and systemic thinking, it’s what really forms the foundation of our work.”

Extending the ESGT Logic Across Adaptive Contexts

As Prerana deepened its practice, it became clear that the logic of ESGT had relevance far beyond the red-light areas where it originated, and they began to translate the core principles into new geographies and identities through targeted extensions like:

- + **Project Aashiyana**, under the Transform NEEV Collective, brings ESGT’s lens to urban informal settlements and slums. Here, the model is applied through geospatial mapping, participatory vulnerability assessments, and community-driven action to identify and address systemic risks. The approach emphasizes place-based prevention, particularly in high-density urban zones where children face overlapping forms of invisibility and neglect.
- + **Project Sanmaan** works with children from the denotified Pardhi tribe, a historically criminalized tribe routinely denied access to institutional protection. Sanmaan challenges this legacy by reclaiming these children’s right to care, legal recognition, and psychosocial dignity within the child protection system.

In parallel, Prerana’s Livelihood and Economic Resilience work focuses on supporting women seeking to exit the cycle of commercial sexual exploitation. Through documentation assistance, micro-grants, and vocational training, the program acknowledges that maternal economic stability is central to long-term child protection outcomes. Finally, Prerana’s role as a mentor and field-shaper has evolved through long-term engagement with grassroots CSOs across India, Bangladesh and Nepal. Prerana supports localized innovation, enabling organizations to adapt ESGT’s core logic to the unique challenges and cultures of their own contexts.

Farheen’s Story: Demonstrating the Full Arc of ESGT

Raised in Kamathipura, Farheen was exposed early to systemic harm. Her mother, entrenched in commercial sexual exploitation, began training her as a pickpocket. A violent episode and subsequent intervention by the CWC triggered her admission into a children’s home through IPP. What followed was not a single intervention, but a sustained continuum of support that spanned multiple ESGT components.

Farheen accessed Prerana’s NCC in her early years, providing her with consistent safety and structure. Through the ESP, she remained enrolled in school, and the IPP safeguarded her adolescence, offering both protection and post-placement planning. Throughout this journey, a dedicated caseworker provided continuity, anchoring trust and guiding her transitions. She went on to complete a master’s degree, trained with Tata Consultancy Services, and secured formal employment, and today, she is married with a child, living a happy life.

Her experience is not an anomaly. It reflects the broader ecosystem of impact Prerana has built over decades, from 2001 to 2022:

- ~ 3,586 children have accessed safe overnight care through NCCs.
- ~ 741 children have been placed through IPP, with structured support into adulthood.
- ~ 526 youth have completed their 12th standard — the majority as first-generation learners.
- ~ 99% of enrolled children remain in school, with a 97.8% pass rate in Class 10.
- ~ 345 HIV-positive and 645 TB-affected women have received targeted medical assistance.
- ~ Legal identity coverage is near-universal, enabling access to education, entitlements, and protection services.

The story of Farheen and others like her, underscores a core ESGT insight: enduring change is built not on episodic interventions, but on sustained, relationship-driven systems of care.

Building Shared Accountability Across Systems

“It has never been about just one organization pitching an idea. What sustained the collaboration was the consistency we built over time — and that consistency required government buy-in. The CWC recognized our effort, and they needed that support as much as we needed their trust.”

The implementation of ESGT thrives through layered partnerships, across government institutions, civil society, academic institutions, and the private sector. These collaborations are built not on transactional agreements, but on long-term trust and mutual accountability.

Prerana works closely with the following stakeholders to increase systemic change and impact:

- + **Government:** WCDs, DLSAs, CWCs and DCPUs — aligned with the JJ Act and Mission Vatsalya.
- + **Civil Society:** Partner NGOs adapt ESGT to tribal, border, and slum contexts.
- + **Academia:** Legal aid clinics with DLSA and DY Patil Law School, internships, student training, awareness-building workshops.
- + **Private Sector:** Linkages with TCS, Taj Hotels, IKS, Goldman Sachs and the likes for livelihood transitions.

Moving from Implementation to Field Leadership

With the ESGT now recognized as both a philosophy and a functional model, Prerana is consciously shifting its focus from programmatic expansion to systemic diffusion. Not scaling through replication, the organization is investing in strategic integration, embedding ESGT principles into the DNA of state systems, civil society architecture, and district-level implementation.

This includes deepening presence in tribal regions, migration corridors, and caste-marginalized communities through vulnerability mapping and ecosystem building; equipping frontline actors with practice guides and training modules; and influencing government frameworks like Mission Vatsalya and national identity schemes to reflect ESGT-aligned logic. Prioritizing influence over footprint, Prerana is setting a long-term course where ESGT becomes a foundational lens for child protection in India. **“For us, scale has always been depth. We don’t really believe in spreading across states. Scaling has also been through capacity building and mentoring other organizations.”**

04

Unicef

Bolstering Alternative Models of Hyperlocal Care

GEOGRAPHY

Maharashtra

FOCUS

+ Intergenerational
Protection+ System-Integrated
Prevention

UNICEF India’s kinship and community-based care model in Maharashtra represents a systemic innovation in the child protection landscape—shifting from reactive, institution-centric interventions to a preventive, ecosystem-oriented approach. Anchored in the socio-ecological determinants of child wellbeing, the program is designed to mitigate the adverse impacts of seasonal migration on children by embedding alternative care within existing kinship structures and enhancing convergence across government service delivery systems.

UNICEF India has been at the forefront of strengthening the national child protection landscape. In Maharashtra, this strategy plays out across two levels:

- + At the state level, UNICEF supports policy reform, systems strengthening, and convergence across departments for integrated child development.
- + At the district level, it builds proof of concept by demonstrating how protection, education, health, and nutrition systems can work together at the last mile.

In the drought-prone districts of Marathwada, Maharashtra, the rhythms of survival are shaped by water scarcity, land degradation, and poverty. Each year, thousands of families from Jalna migrate in search of seasonal work—cutting sugarcane, toiling in brick kilns, and working construction sites far from home. For children in these families, migration is not just a change in location. It disrupts access to school, healthcare, safety, and stable caregiving—pushing them into cycles of neglect, exploitation, and chronic vulnerability.

In response, UNICEF India, in partnership with the District Administration of Jalna and local NGOs SACRED and Swaraj Gramin Vikas Pratishthan, has co-created a model of kinship and community-based care. Through the Balmitras initiative, supported by the Jalna District Administration, and local NGOs, UNICEF has activated 450 youth volunteers from within the district. They are equipped to conduct door-to-door campaigns, encouraging migrant families to leave their children with trustworthy caregivers, thus safeguarding their education. This program leverages existing community structures, building capacity among youth leaders, and aligning frontline government systems, delivering measurable improvements in child safety, school retention, and care continuity.

Addressing the Structural Vulnerabilities of Seasonal Migration

Children are uniquely and disproportionately affected by such migration. Those who accompany their families to worksites endure hazardous and unsanitary living conditions with limited or no access to formal education, health services, nutrition, or protective mechanisms. In many cases, they are exposed to child labour or early marriage. Conversely, children left behind with grandparents or siblings face emotional, social, and economic challenges. They may continue attending school but often experience caregiving gaps, mental distress, and increased domestic burdens, impeding their development and wellbeing.

In Jalna, the program specifically focuses on preventing unsafe child migration by embedding alternative care within kinship structures, mobilizing local functionaries and youth volunteers, and ensuring convergence at the village level.

The Balmitra Program: Understanding Genesis and Objectives

The program's overarching goal is to create a protective ecosystem for children by enabling safe, family-based alternatives to migration through kinship care, while also strengthening service delivery and convergence across child protection, education, nutrition, and health systems.

Its specific objectives include:

- ~ **Preventing Child Migration:** Preventing distress-driven unsafe migration of children, through temporary care arrangements with extended family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts/uncles) or trusted community caregivers during parents' migration cycles.
- ~ **Ensuring Service Access at Source:** Linking stay-back children to local entitlements such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), school enrolment, and psychosocial support.
- ~ **Advancing Portability of Services:** Advocating for systemic reforms via mechanisms such as the State Migration Committee and Education Guarantee Cards to enable continued access to schooling and other services at migration destinations.
- ~ **Institutionalizing Convergence:** Strengthening village-level coordination across Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Village Child Protection Committees (VCPCs), School Management Committees (SMCs), Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), and schoolteachers.

In rural Maharashtra, where formal alternative care options are often scarce and fragmented, the role of the Balmitras becomes profoundly significant. They serve as a vital bridge for children who might otherwise slip through the cracks of protection systems, particularly those left behind when parents migrate for work. Their primary focus is to raise awareness about the risks of unsafe migration and to encourage kinship care arrangements, ensuring that children can remain in their home communities under the care of grandparents, extended relatives, or trusted neighbors.

However, through individual and group counselling sessions with parents, Balmitras also help families navigate difficult choices and identify the safest care alternatives available. They also anchor community-based support for children through structured after-school programs held three times a week. These sessions combine academic assistance with play, life-skills education, and psychosocial care, creating spaces that are as protective as they are nurturing.

Importantly, these localized interventions contribute to systemic resilience in ways that formal services alone cannot. They help in building trust within communities and equipping families with the knowledge and resources to make protective choices, Balmitras strengthen the informal safety nets that often determine children's wellbeing. In contexts where resources and state services are stretched thin, their presence helps close critical gaps, ensuring that children not only remain safe in the short term but are also better supported over time. In this sense, Balmitras represent a model of community-rooted care that reinforces, rather than replaces, the broader child protection ecosystem.

Reflecting Upon a Model Rooted in Systems Thinking

The program draws upon a socio-ecological model of child wellbeing, acknowledging that children's lives are shaped by multiple intersecting systems—family, community, service delivery networks, and policy frameworks.

- + **Age-Specific and Child-Centered Design:** The initiative recognizes that children's needs differ by age and stage of development, and tailors care arrangements accordingly. Younger children are placed with caregivers equipped to meet their physical and emotional needs, while older children benefit from structured learning, recreation, and peer engagement activities.
- + **Systems Convergence and Decentralized Governance:** Under the direction of the District Magistrate (DM) of Jalna District and the Principal Secretary of the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD), the program institutionalized multi-stakeholder convergence at the district and village level. Local functionaries meet regularly to plan and monitor support for migrating families, enabling uninterrupted access to education, health, and protection services.
- + **Embedded Civil Society Roles:** Partner NGOs SACRED and SWARAJ act as facilitators, building linkages across systems, supporting frontline workers, and enabling social mobilization. They are instrumental in generating community buy-in and creating local accountability mechanisms.
- + **Participatory and Preventive Orientation:** Children's voices are integrated through the Balmitra (Child-Friendly Volunteer) initiative, where trained community youth conduct home visits, facilitate after-school activities, and provide psychosocial support. The program prioritizes prevention of harm by addressing migration drivers and strengthening familial and community resilience.

Shankar's Story: Mobilizing Youth-Led Awareness Programs in Shevga Village

Shankar Aasaram Gaikwad, 29, is a commerce graduate, now the elected Sarpanch of Shevga village (Jalna, Maharashtra), and a Balmitra since 2021. His journey embodies how community volunteers can become powerful governance champions for children. Having experienced the hardship of seasonal migration as a child, Shankar became deeply committed to creating a safer environment for the next generation. As a Balmitra, he conducted regular home visits, counselled migrant parents, organized study circles and play sessions, and mentored children left behind under kinship care.

The results are striking: when the Balmitra program began in Shevga, 94% of children (63 of 67) migrated annually with their families. By 2022–23, this number fell to 66%, with 19 children staying back safely in the village. Shankar attributes this shift to growing parental trust, improved after-school support, and the reliable presence of Balmitras who help caregivers problem-solve in real time.

Today, Shankar has been able to scale up his work: linking over 1,000 households to government schemes, improving WASH facilities in schools, and embedding child protection into village planning. He continues to mentor upcoming Balmitras and uses migration data to anticipate risks, proving that youth volunteers can evolve into governance leaders who place children's well-being at the heart of community decision-making.

Durpata's Story: Leveraging the Benefits of Intergenerational Care

For the Awhad family, seasonal migration for sugarcane harvesting had long been the only way to survive. Each year, Prakash and his wife would take their children with them, including 12-year-old Rupali—disrupting her schooling and exposing her to unsafe conditions. As a landless, Scheduled Caste household, their options were limited, and the decision to migrate felt inevitable. However, through sustained engagement by the Balmitras and the Kinship and Community-Based Care Program, the family was encouraged to explore alternatives.

The turning point came when Santosh, their 18-year-old son who suffers from seizures and had previously dropped out of school, joined the Balmitra network. Empowered by training and support, Santosh became an advocate for his sister's education within the family. Together with the Balmitras, Santosh convinced his parents that Rupali would be safer and better off staying in the village under the care of her grandparents. To strengthen this decision, the eldest brother Gangaram (22) secured work in Aurangabad, providing additional income so that the family could afford to leave Rupali behind.

The Balmitras now ensure continuity of care by:

- ~ **Regular Follow-ups:** Visiting the grandparents' home to check on Rupali's well-being.
- ~ **School Coordination:** Working with her teachers to keep her education on track.
- ~ **Social Protection:** Linking the family to entitlements and schemes that reduce financial pressure.

The Awhad family's story shows how the Balmitra model transforms migration from an inevitability into a choice. By empowering Santosh to influence his parents and offering practical support, the program kept Rupali in school.

Balmitras act both as first responders and as catalysts for coordination, and illustrate what an integrated child protection ecosystem can look like: one where families, communities, local governments, and civil society work in concert to protect children from harm and build pathways for their wellbeing.

Reimagining Community-Based Child Protection

The Balmitra model is essential within the broader child protection ecosystem. By design, it operates through linkages between the immediate needs of children at risk and preventive systems-building work at the community and institutional levels. They address the most urgent vulnerabilities of children whose parents migrate for seasonal work. They identify families likely to migrate, conduct door-to-door awareness drives, and persuade parents to choose safer kinship care options instead of taking children to hazardous work sites. This direct engagement helps children remain in their home communities, where they can continue their education and stay connected to trusted caregivers.

Yet the strength of the model lies in how it extends upstream to enable convergence among multiple stakeholders. Balmitras maintain granular data on migrant families and children, which feeds into decision-making by village sarpanches, Anganwadi workers, and local NGOs. This information allows frontline workers to coordinate more effectively and helps district authorities plan interventions that are responsive to children's realities. Balmitras also bring trust and cultural legitimacy that formal actors often struggle to achieve. This trust enables them to bridge divides between families and government systems, ensuring that entitlements, such as continued school enrolment, midday meals, and social protection benefits can actually reach the children left behind.



A World Worth Building

What would it mean to place childhood at the center of our collective imagination?

The stories and interventions by NEEV partners offer a glimpse, into what it would mean to think of children as full-time members of society. In villages and urban bastis, volunteer guardians remain vigilant to the quiet signals of harm, the needs that slip through official cracks. Their vigilance is not bureaucratic; it is relational, rooted in proximity and care. Elsewhere, local governments are beginning to connect the dots—that a livelihood scheme here, a family planning program there, a health clinic or midday meal policy can ripple out to profoundly shape a child's life trajectory. And shelters and institutional support, often thought of as the last resort for children on the margins, can be reimagined as safe havens for children most in need.

Their work reveals something long known but rarely acted upon—that any vulnerability is constructed—and therefore can be de-constructed and re-constructed. It demands a reframing of how we read risk, allocate resources, and imagine responsibility as the shared mandate of humanity itself.

To design with children in mind is not to cede complexity. It is to reintroduce empathy. Not to simplify the world, but to dignify it.

When we approach other demographics with the same nuance and attentiveness we're trained to offer children—when we see the elderly, the disabled, migrants, informal workers not as problems to solve, but as people to center—we begin to design systems that are not just efficient, but equitable. When we stop treating crises—climate shocks, economic collapses, conflict—as background conditions and start recognizing their intergenerational toll, we move from reactive approaches to anticipatory practices.

In India, this reckoning is especially urgent. When schools collapse in floods, when girls disappear from classrooms, when boys fall into unregulated labor, our default response has been outrage, but not yet, a redesign. Plainly put, we cannot afford to raise our children amid collapsing ecosystems, unlivable cities, and eroding trust in institutions. Resilience must be intentionally designed, shifting gears from isolated interventions to integrated systems, vertical silos to horizontal cooperation. Delia Pop is hopeful about a world that builds in this direction: **“Here’s a system of the future: one that brings players that otherwise work in silos - from early childhood development, protection, education, income generation, to work together. This will help us utilize less resources, but for a higher cause, for specific children who need more support, who need to be rescued and are suffering from violence – we can provide them top notch quality care.”**

Children are astonishing ethnographers of the world around them. They notice potholes and polluted air, broken elevators and flooded roads. They see where the school bus cannot stop safely, where the park gives way to a parking lot. They absorb cues about safety, dignity, and belonging. About whose needs are prioritized, and whose lives are designed around in the world. They are learning—constantly—about where, and whether, they fit within it.

We often talk about children as the future. But they are also the present: alive to every decision we make, every priority we set, and making meaning from the structures we leave behind. One day, they will be the ones to decide what kind of world to build in return. **So today, we must make sure that we leave them with a world worth building.**

Annexure 1

Acknowledgements

This report is the fruit of a tree that has grown steadily over generations, grounded in a conviction that every child deserves safety and care. It traces the many roots of child protection, both as an idea, and as a sector of immense complexity operates, evolves, and delivers on its promises in India.

It is enriched by the insights and dedication of its commissioners, collaborators and contributors. Each of these stakeholders, to the best of their capacity, stands resolutely in defense of India's children. It is their spirit that sustains this sector, and also our report, so it is with gratitude that we acknowledge their contributions:

- + **Alpa Vora and the UNICEF team (UNICEF)**
- + **Kusum Mohapatra and the Miracle Foundation team (Miracle Foundation)**
- + **Kajol Menon, Nicole Rangel and the Leher team (Leher)**
- + **Priti Patkar and the Prerana team (Prerana)**
- + **Vikas Choudhry and the Sambodhi team (Sambodhi)**
- + **Enakshi Ganguly (HAQ, Former)**
- + **Farida Lambay (Pratham)**
- + **Vasudha Wanchoo (Jhamtse Gatsal)**
- + **Pradeep Narayanan (Praxis)**
- + **Karthik Srinivasan (Children's Investment Fund Foundation)**
- + **Vedprakash Gautam (Children's Investment Fund Foundation)**
- + **Mannat Anand (Make a Difference - MAD)**
- + **Dr. Delia Pop (UBS OF Advisor on Child Protection, FBAC, Foster Care)**
- + **Dr. Nilima Mehta (consultant to UNICEF, CRY, Childline India Foundation, ICSW, ICCW, CCW, IAPA, FSC, Vatsalya Foundation)**

We are profoundly thankful to the Transform NEEV Collective and UBS Optimus for envisioning and empowering this effort. This report was developed by the team at Dasra—Anushka Dias, Kasturi Gandhi, Rukmini Banerjee, and Yash Thakoor—with valuable inputs from Ami Misra, Gauri Sanghi, Millie Mathew, Rishad Surti, and Sujith Ail. We also thank the teams at Miracle Foundation India, Leher, Prerana, Sambodhi, and UNICEF for their continued partnership, and Saachi Kinjani for her valuable support helping us put it all together. We are grateful to everyone for their support in this endeavor, but most of all, we are grateful for the kindness, willingness and steadfastness of all those nourishing the tree that must never fall, because under its sheltering canopy, children everywhere will continue to the safety and care they need and deserve.

Annexure 2

Methodology

The intent of the report is to surface field-grounded insights that can shape how we think, plan, and act across the development ecosystem. Using a qualitative, inquiry-led methodology, we have engaged with diverse sources of knowledge, such as narrative accounts, historical trajectories, institutional data, and field-based insights, the report offers a systems-oriented understanding of child protection's past, present, and future relevance.

- ~ **Literature Review:** A purposive review of policies, histories, interventions and frameworks was undertaken to trace the evolution of child protection—both globally and in India—and to situate emerging insights within a larger narrative. This supported the contextual framing for both field models and thematic analysis.
- ~ **Expert Consultations:** 11 longform conversations were conducted with sector stalwarts—practitioners, policy leaders, academics, and members of the NEEV Collective—including teams from Miracle Foundation, Leher, Prerana, and UNICEF. These dialogues brought together decades of grounded insight.
- ~ **Practitioner Interviews:** Four detailed case studies were developed to document how CP principles are translated into program architecture and systems engagement. Each follows a common structure—tracing the problem statement, model design, implementation journey, and ecosystem impact. These were done through semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders and sector practitioners.
- ~ **Internal Synthesis:** Throughout the writing process, iterative sessions were held to align findings, refine thematic frames, and test insights against practitioner wisdom from across the field.

In Part A, an iterative and thematic approach was used to analyze transcripts and field insights. Rather than seeking consensus, the analysis traced recurring patterns: how practitioners spoke of risk, resilience, systems breakdowns, or relational care. The goal was not to summarize the sector but to surface its worldview—and position it as relevant for any sector grappling with exclusion, fragility, or institutional failure.

In Part B, a case-specific narrative approach was used to document how each intervention operationalized key principles in distinct ways. Through interviews, internal documentation, and published reports, we mapped how organizations designed their models, engaged systems, fostered trust, and generated outcomes. These cases were chosen for how they demonstrate the application of CP thinking, particularly around prevention, community ownership, child participation, and systems alignment. The result is a series of models that offer practical insight, design logic, and contextual adaptability for others to learn from.

Limitations: Insights presented in this report are drawn from those who could participate within the project timeline. Given that this was an open-ended and evolving process, not all organizations or experts who were part of earlier conversations could be fully included in this draft. The design of this report is iterative, and we view it as a living document, one that can and should grow with the sector.

While the report foregrounds children in its narrative and case studies, it does not directly include children's own voices, in part due to ethical constraints and the complexity of doing so meaningfully within the available scope. That said, many of the models we document are deeply rooted in participatory practices with children and adolescents, and we have prioritized these in our analysis.

Annexure 3

Lessons from History on Centering Children's Vulnerability

To engage with the history of child protection is to understand that stories of such change and transformation are best seen in motion. Across centuries and continents, these stories have emerged in places that had forgotten, or perhaps never learned, to account for children in governance, in justice systems, in imaginations that had not yet evolved the language to describe what it meant to truly see and serve the interests of a child, and in public life, where children were too often invisible, their needs folded into the margins of adult priorities. Some centuries old, others still unfolding, they reveal what it took to look closely at children's vulnerability, and refusing to look away.

- I. **Drawing Boundaries on Child Labour through The Factory Acts of England:** Collective thinking and legislation around children's distinct and basic needs began in the 1800s, mainly in response to the intensification of child labour during England's Industrial Revolution. Changing market dynamics and infrastructure deeply affected financially insecure families, forcing many of their young children into factories, mills and mines. Children under 17 years of age constituted nearly 30% of market employment and many others worked undocumented in family economies. Intellectual and humanistic concern about intensifying child labour found support in the Report of the Select Committee on the Bill for the Regulation of Factories (1832) - which described factories as "hellish institutions for the destruction of childhood". The result was the regulation of child labor across industries through The Factory Acts, which set limits on the age of employment for children, hours of work they put in per week, and set up an on-site school system where children worked half-day and attended school half-day. Over time, documented child labour saw a definitive decrease.
- II. **Rethinking Incarceration for Childhood Delinquency in Colonial India:** In India, incarceration of children was one of the first child protection issues to receive formal attention, also gaining momentum in the late 1800s. Children convicted by imperial courts were typically incarcerated with adult prisoners in wards without cells, with juvenile delinquents regularly drifting in and out of prison and turning increasingly delinquent with each visit. To ensure that India's large young population could grow up to serve the crown optimally, the imperial government began to focus on the reformation of juvenile delinquents and their return to productive society. This led to the passing of the Reformatory Schools Acts of 1876 and 1897 with large reformatories built in Calcutta, Hazaribagh, Chingleput, Jabalpur, and Bareilly, the Madras Children's Act of 1920 (setting precedence for the Juvenile Justice Act of 1986), and the construction of Borstal Schools for adolescent offenders in the 1930s.
- III. **Protecting the Sanctity of Childhood through Child Marriage Reform:** The latter 1800s and early 1900s saw social reformers rally for the abolition of child marriage. Civil society actors – the All-India Women's Conference, Women's Indian Association and National Council of Women in India and organized groups of Muslim women – saw it as a manifestation of interconnected gender, social, economic and political issues. Civil society particularly women's rights organizations like the All India Women's Conference, advocated raising the age of marriage and consent to the Age of Consent Committee (1928-1929), led by Moropant Vishwanath Joshi, playing a crucial role in shaping the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. The British, however, simply saw the twin evils of early consummation and pregnancy. With the single-minded goal to curtail both, they passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929, fixing the marriageable age to 14 years for girls and 18 years for boys. Their arguments were accepted in spirit, culminating into the Child Marriage Restraint Act.

- IV. Leveraging Children's Participation in Children's Institutions in Poland:** From Poland, it was the decades-long work of paediatrician and educator Janusz Korczak that informed the essence of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. His radio program "Natterings of an Old Doctor" was such a hit that one of his listeners, who grew up to be a leading journalist and intellectual said - "We had the impression that he was talking to us personally. He told us what our rights were, that we were just as important as our parents." He stepped away from his career at a hospital and built two orphanages - Dom Sierot (1912) and Nasz Dom (1919), running them as "children's republics" with general meetings presided over by a child, a system of rewards and punishments, a parliament, a tribunal, and a newspaper. In his ultimate battle against the persecution of Jews, he remained at the side of 200 children in the Warsaw ghetto. Refusing to abandon them, he died for his ideas in the Treblinka concentration camp on August 6, 1942.xi
- V. Building the Foundation for The Declaration of Rights of the Child:** During World War I, well-meaning aristocrat Eglantyne Jebb was horrified by newspaper images of starving children in Germany and Austria—victims of the Allied blockade that cut off vital supplies. Outraged but undeterred, she began a public campaign to raise awareness of the war's hidden toll on children. She distributed flyers bearing the blunt message: "Our blockade has caused this – millions of children are starving to death." But many turned away, unwilling to face the grim reality. Jebb was arrested for her protest and brought before a judge. Instead of reprimanding her, the judge was so moved by her conviction that he paid her fine—effectively making the first donation to what would become Save the Children, founded by Jebb in 1919. In 1924, she was invited to present the Declaration of the Rights of the Child—a groundbreaking document asserting that every child, regardless of nationality, had basic human rights: "the child that is hungry must be fed, the child that is sick must be nursed, the child that is backward must be helped, the delinquent child must be reclaimed, and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered..." Adopted by the League of Nations on September 26, 1924, it laid the groundwork for what would become the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, now the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world.
- VI. Protecting Children from Crises during the Indian Famine:** Against the backdrop of the great Indian famine of the 1896, the story of William and Carrie Bruere stands out. What began as a religious mission, quickly became a recognition of how deeply children's lives were entangled with the crises of the world. The famine laid bare the extent to which children, often invisible in the larger political and economic discourse of the time, were facing the harshest brunt of systemic collapse. The Brueres began running support shelters. News about their work in India catalysed networks of support across the globe—from church groups in the U.S. to relief societies in London. It also inspired reformers in India, such as Pandita Ramabai, to build the foundation for what would eventually become the Mukti Mission, in Kedgaon near Pune, sheltering thousands of children, and especially young girls, many of whom had been sold into slavery, abandoned. This is what reformers across time have come to understand: to work with children is to work at the root.
- VII. Rebuilding with Compassion for Japan's Hibakusha Children:** In the radioactive ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the story of the hibakusha children—survivors of the atomic bombings—emerged as one of the most transformative chapters in modern humanitarian thought.xv Orphaned, injured, stigmatized, and often forgotten in the rush to rebuild, the children came to embody the quiet toll of a global catastrophe. Father Pedro Arrupe, a Spanish Jesuit priest who had witnessed the aftermath of the bombing firsthand, used his medical background as a first responder to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. He took in orphaned children and provided medical care with meagre supplies, turning a crumbling Jesuit novitiate into a refuge of care. His work, along with the nurses, teachers, social workers that joined his cause, helped in rebuilding infrastructures such as orphanages, schools, and medical facilities with hibakusha children in mind. The Hiroshima War Orphans Foster Home emerged from this endeavor. Indeed, Japan's post-war identity as a nation committed to peace, to banning nuclear weapons, or even its commitment to civic remembrance was shaped, in part, by how it chose to confront the pain and futures of its children.

More than a century since they first took shape, these moments represent a lesson: of reckoning with power, its dismantling and an insistence on placing the most vulnerable at the heart of nation building. We acknowledge that many of these narratives originate from the colonial era, with efforts aimed at reforming an inherently oppressive system. Nevertheless, these incidents also illuminate the tangible realities of social work then and reveal early attempts at decolonization.

And it invites us to ask what it truly means to protect, to serve, and to imagine a world made safer. We acknowledge that many of these narratives originate from the colonial era, with efforts aimed at reforming an inherently oppressive system. Nevertheless, these incidents also illuminate the tangible realities of social work at the time and reveal early attempts to address decolonization.

Annexure 4

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