

Re-Affirming Family Based Care

Date: 27th – 28th February 2025

Location: Hotel Hyatt Regency & Residences, Pune, Maharashtra

Organized by: UNICEF and UBS Optimus Foundation

Summary

On February 27th and 28th, 2025, UNICEF, in partnership with UBS Optimus Foundation hosted a National Consultation titled “**Re-affirming Family-Based Care**” in Pune, Maharashtra. The Transform Neev Collective and India Alternative Care Network were the technical collaborators for the consultation.

The key objectives of the consultation were to foster an enabling ecosystem where prevention of family separation and **family care is prioritized** over institutionalization, create a platform for knowledge sharing and evidence on family strengthening and family-based care, exchange of learnings globally and nationally on policies, programs, innovations and best practices. Additionally, it aimed at identifying issues, challenges and opportunities for up scaling family-based care in India.

The consultation brought together over 100 participants including Honourable Minister WCD, Government of Maharashtra, government representatives from MWCD and 17 states of India, child protection experts, and NGOs, thought leaders, practitioners, academicians, UNICEF, and global experts.

The consultation spread over two days discussed various thematic areas of family-based care pointing to the fact that child protection needs to be universal and inclusive.

- The deliberations acknowledged that there have been paradigm shifts and significant achievements in the global and national journey of bringing in care reforms. The law, policy and practice have contributed to declining child institutionalization and a strong shift towards family strengthening and family-based care models such as kinship care, foster care, and community-based care. CEO CARA, MWCD emphasised these policies and guidelines are used to promote family based care and greater awareness and collaboration to be advanced further.
- Mission Vatsalya data of the government of India points out that the number of children placed in family-based care including adoption, sponsorship and foster care has risen from 62,675 in 2022-23 to 1,70,895 in 2024 -25. Funding patterns are also changing—governments and donors are prioritizing family-based care over institutional care.
- A "family first" approach must guide all interventions, prioritizing the prevention of harm and reducing unnecessary family separation. It was emphasized that care reform messaging must be simple, relatable, and aligned with cultural traditions and societal values to build public support.
- Several state-led programs were highlighted. These included among others Bihar Government's Udaan; Chhattisgarh's Uday, Ummang, and Ujiyara; Maharashtra's Bal Sangopan Yojana; Gujarat's

Palak Mata Pita Yojana; Rajasthan's Palanhar Yojana and Odisha's Mamta, Ashirvad and Subhadra. These initiatives demonstrate the positive impact of linking financial assistance for child protection and linkages to social protection schemes for family strengthening.

- Promising initiatives such as child friendly spaces and adolescent resource centres in Jammu & Kashmir, safe city initiative for children in Madhya Pradesh, day-care centers, child protection committees and child protection hubs, children and adolescent groups, youth volunteers supporting frontliners and panchayats to prevent harm, and innovations in community gatekeeping and mobilization from across the country through government and non-government efforts were highlighted as effective practices of helping children thrive and live in the safety of their families.
- The discussion dwelt on bringing special programs and flexibility in policy to support marginalized communities including de-notified tribes, children of inter-generational sex workers, families affected by climate change, conflict or displacement, children on the move, and children with disabilities. It was emphasized that the care services must be inclusive and designed to reach the most vulnerable ensuring that those at the last mile receive the support.
- While providing entitlement based social protection and financial assistance to vulnerable and at-risk families was recognized as essential, additional cash-plus support including mental health and emotional support, building parental skills and resilience, life skills, vocational training, and livelihood support were considered essential for strengthening family resilience.
- Protective factors such as parental resilience, parenting knowledge & child development, strong social networks, social & emotional competence of children and concrete family support (financial, healthcare, etc.) during emergency or crisis were underscored. Emphasis was given on creating a therapeutic environment within the families.
- The recent years have shown a significant shift of children moving into family-based care. Abrupt de-institutionalisation has resulted in children's re-institutionalisation. This systematic and structured transition planning, involving both children and families, was highlighted to ensure successful reintegration. Case management models were shared and discussed. Deinstitutionalization, family re-unification and placements in family-based care, cannot co-exist with large number of children entering institutions. Prevention, gatekeeping and family strengthening are crucial.
- Attitudinal shifts towards family-based care among all stakeholders were deemed as key to successful transition and preventing re-institutionalization. There is need to expand such efforts.
- Several State schemes and programmes that support informal and formal kinship and community-based care practices have proved effective in enabling children to live in families and within communities. Kinship care has proved an effective practice in several contexts such as COVID -19 crisis, for children affected by seasonal migration and families in crisis.

- The power of collaboration between government, CSO/NGOs, local community-based institutions enabled catalytic and transformative results. An approach that embeds inter-departmental collaboration with health, education, panchayati raj, police; cooperation between livelihood mission and child protection systems such as in Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh and multi-disciplinary engagement involving social workers, health and mental health professionals, special educator has made a significant difference. Prevention of family separation and providing access to services and schemes is key as was discussed in the presentations by Telangana and Karnataka.
- State context-specific strategies have worked to lay foundations for foster care in several states of India. Global experience points to adopting a non-targeted, homegrown approach. Encouraging foster care with extended families holds promise for stable, child centric and sustainable family-based care. This was highlighted through experiences shared by Kerala, Chhattisgarh, Assam and Rajasthan
- There are challenges around low awareness and resistance to non-related foster care. Many prospective foster parents view foster care as a path to adoption, highlighting a need for clearer distinction and awareness-building efforts. The need for developing structured training modules for functionaries, foster parents, and children integrating psycho-social care and ensuring continuous learning through interstate exposure visits are desirable.
- It was felt that bringing all children under the purview of the Juvenile Justice System is not necessary as not all children are in need of state's care and protection. When care services like day-care, drop-in centres, counselling support, safe spaces in communities, social securities are available to families, children within families are significantly supported. This was discussed in the sessions by Tamil Nadu and Odisha.
- Data-driven decision-making is key to sustaining this transition. Strong data-sharing mechanisms between government and social service sectors should be established to enable real-time tracking of children in alternative care. A national measurement framework will be critical in assessing reintegration success, placement stability, and child well-being outcomes, ensuring that family-based care remains both sustainable and effective.
- Professionalizing social workforce, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and comprehensive training approaches were emphasized. Trainings for social workers, child protection functionaries, and frontline staff is needed to improve case management, reintegration processes, and gatekeeping measures. A community-driven effort to support families and children was emphasized for shared responsibility and accountability. NIPCCD, MWCD as key resource agency highlighted the work and how child protection workforce initiatives enhances the uptake of family based care in India.
- A multi-sectoral approach is identified as the key to creating an integrated ecosystem to support and strengthen families, bringing together child protection, social security, education, and health sectors.

Recommendations

The two-day deliberations identified the following key policy recommendation:

- Develop State Specific Strategy and Plan of Action for Family Based Care, with critical milestones and indicators that are monitored periodically at the highest level of governance.
- Create operational mechanisms to ensure inter-ministerial/departmental convergence for services and social protection for vulnerable families.
- Build synergy and synchronization between different sectoral data systems to inform programmes and policies (Eg: Health, Education, ICDS & WCD MIS).
- Undertake knowledge management and documentation of best practices and innovations (Govt & CSOs) for evidence generation, replication and scale up especially on kinship care and foster care.
- Augment financial assistance (Social Protection) with Plus components such as MHPSS, education, health care, parenting, building parental resilience, life skills, vocational skilling, livelihood opportunities and others.
- Invest further in the Child Protection Workforce (DCPUs, CWCs, JJBs, CCI staff etc) with independent cadre till the block level for better delivery of CP services. Enhance the role of existing frontline workers (FLWs) of allied systems for prevention and effective monitoring. Incentivize community-based child protection workforce.
- Create social innovation hubs, providing opportunities for corporate investments to promote innovation in family strengthening and family-based care.