STATUTORY CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

ECARO White Paper - brief overview and next steps

Stela Grigoras and Joanna Rogers, UNICEF ECARO

Purpose, objectives and methods

Purpose: to increase understanding of the role of statutory family support services in modern child protection systems and to further inform UNICEF work with governments in the ECA region in child protection system strengthening

Objective: review of the development and use of statutory family support services in ECA region including EU, and other parts of the world, where statutory family support services are provided to families with children where there is a risk for the child to be separated from the birth family temporarily or permanently and placed in out-of-home care.

Methods: desk review, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews in a group of selected countries where statutory family support services exist and are effective in gate-keeping children outside of care system. The review will also include inputs from an External Reference Group of experts (ERG) and participation in active review and reflection groups of governments (ARG) interested in learning and translating into real changes in childcare systems.

SKRB
2024

Continuum of alternative care systems described in the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care for Children

| Prevention of unnecessary separation of children from their families and family networks | Reuniting and reintegrating the children with their families or family networks | Suitable alternative care that meets each child's needs and is in their best interests |

SKRB 2024

What constitutes a good statutory family support service established as part of an effective gatekeeping system and continuum of childcare services?

Sub questions

- Definitions of family support

- Difference between statutory family support and other family strengthening services

- Normative guidance on what constitutes a good quality statutory family support service and the key methodological, organizational, and financial elements

- What are the links between statutory family support services and non-statutory family strengthening services?

- Strategies to boost the development of statutory family support services

iii. Applying the principles of necessity and suitability
The following are among the key elements to take into account to ensure that alternative care is used only when necessary and is appropriate for the child concerned.

Q1
IS CARE GENUINELY NEEDED?

Reduce the perceived need for formal alternative care

- Implement poverty alleviation programmes
- Address societal factors that can provoke family breakdown (e.g. discrimination, stigmatisation, marginalisation…)
- Improve family support and strengthening services
- Provide day-care and respite care opportunities
- Promote informal/customary coping strategies
- Consult with the child, parents and wider family to identify options
- Tackle avoidable relinquishment in a pro-active manner
- Stop unwarranted decisions to remove a child from parental care

Discourage recourse to alternative care

- Ensure a robust gate-keeping system with decision-making authority
- Make available a range of effective advisory and practical resources to which parents in difficulty can be referred
- Prohibit the 'recruitment' of children for placement in care
- Eliminate systems for funding care settings that encourage unnecessary placements and/or retention of children in alternative care
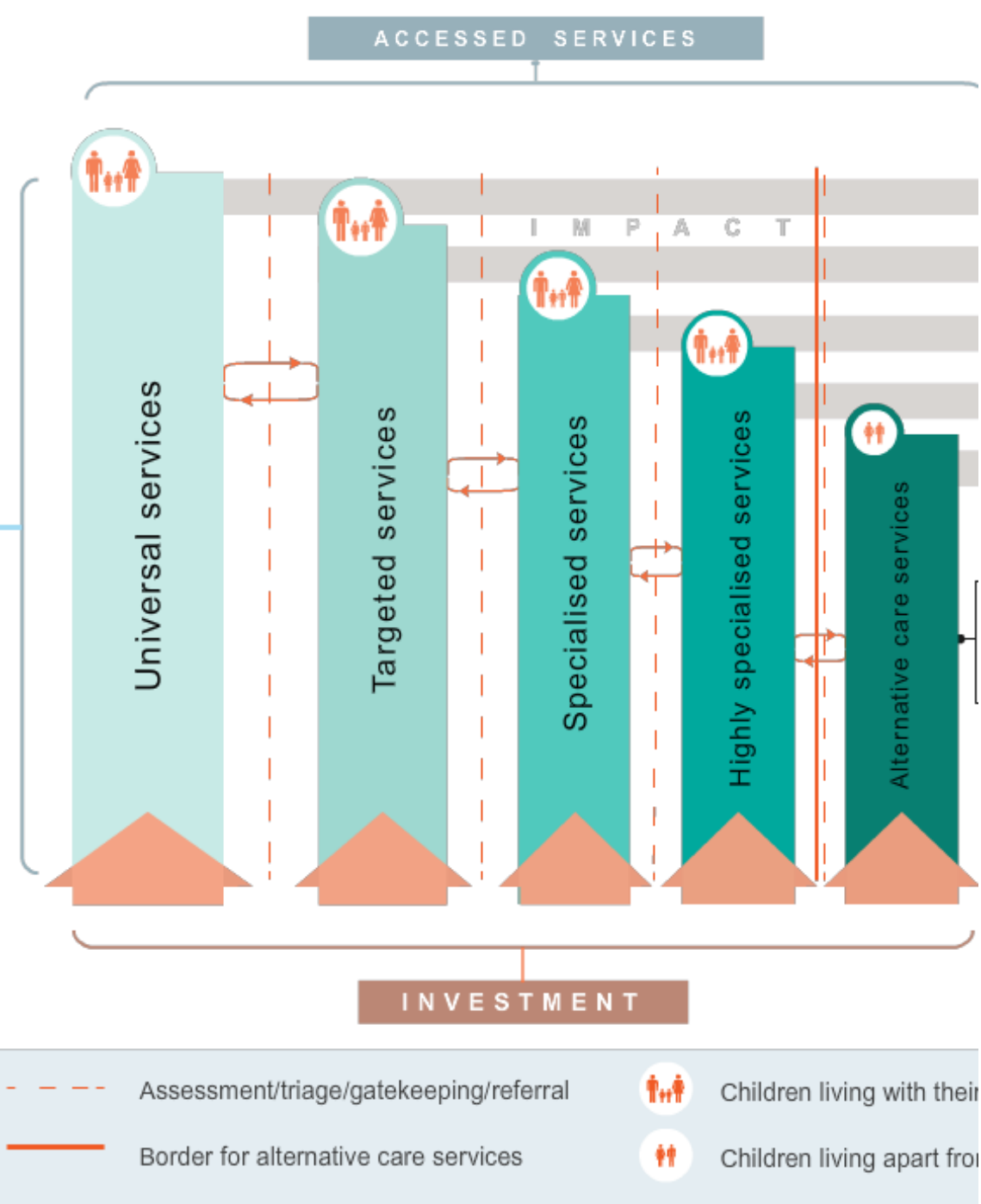- Regularly review whether or not each placement is still appropriate and needed

THE NECESSITY PRINCIPLE

Q2
IS THE CARE APPROPRIATE FOR THE CHILD?

Ensure formal alternative care settings meet minimum standards

- Commit to compliance with human rights obligations
- Provide full access to basic services, especially health-care and education
- Ensure adequate human resources (assessment, qualifications and motivation of carers)
- Promote and facilitate appropriate contact with parents/other family members
- Protect children from violence and exploitation
- Set in place mandatory registration and authorisation of all care providers, based on strict criteria to be fulfilled
- Prohibit care providers with primary goals of a political, religious or economic nature
- Establish an independent inspection mechanism carrying out regular and unannounced visits

Ensure that the care setting meets the needs of the child

- Foresee a full range of care options
- Assign gatekeeping tasks to qualified professionals who systematically assess which care setting is likely to cater best to a child's characteristics and situation
- Make certain that residential care is used only when it will provide the most constructive response
- Require the care provider's cooperation in finding an appropriate long-term solution for each child

THE SUITABILITY PRINCIPLE

SKRB 2024

Questions arising from prelminary consultations with UNICEF Country Offices

- If focus too narrow on gatekeeping and prevention of separation means risk of missing out on critically important wider systems of family support (social protection, housing etc) in the definition of 'statutory family support'

- Statutory services can be delivered by non-government organisations

- Move towards integrated services (vertically between levels of government and horizontally across sectors)

Desk review inquiry framework

Policy – what are the legal, policy and regulatory requirements for effective family support and child protection? What are the common provisions that represent a minimum core mechanism? How do statutory family support and child protection systems and policies fit into the wider system of child and family policies and services (including universal services)?

Practice – what are the ways of working in statutory family support and child protection services, what are the core essential practices that constitute quality and effectiveness in preventing unnecessary separation and protecting children? How can governments establish statutory family support and child protection?

Evidence – what is the evidence that these practices are effective for children and families in preventing unnecessary separation, protection children and improving care? Why should governments put in place such practices? How can governments monitor and evaluate effectiveness of statutory support and child protection?

Difference – what are the differences between statutory systems and why? How do statutory systems differ in response to different drivers of family separation and children entering alternative care? If children with disabilities or migrant children are among those most likely to enter alternative care, how can statutory systems adapt to strengthen prevention?

And...

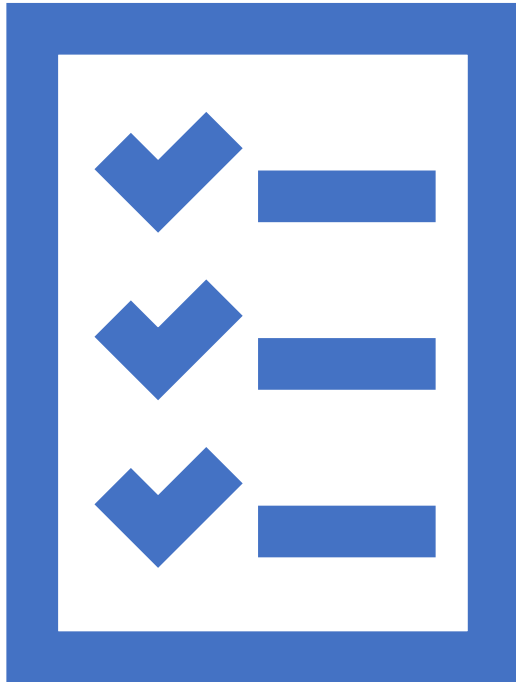Key indicators of effective family support and child protection that monitor the prevention of risk of separation

Service delivery and funding mechanisms for family support and child protection – centralized, decentralized, government, non-government and private

Definition adopted for this this inquiry (which may change)

Statutory family support and child protection means measures or services that are prescribed in legislation to support families and protect children. This means that all children and families have a right, in law, to receive these services and support measures and that they are intended to strengthen families, improve care provided to children, and prevent unnecessary separation. This means they will be linked closely to the factors driving separation of children in each country.

Desk review (ongoing)

A brief selection of preliminary findings

SKRB 2024

Prevention and reintegration

States should promote parental care through:

Social policies	Integrated system of child protection and family support
Services such as child and family social workers, day care, youth services, services for single parents, short breaks services for children with disabilities, housing, health, education services, parenting courses	Services to support return home (reintegration)

Coordinated, integrated child protection and family support services

Active family support services, reintegration, parenting and crisis services for children at risk of abuse, violence and neglect
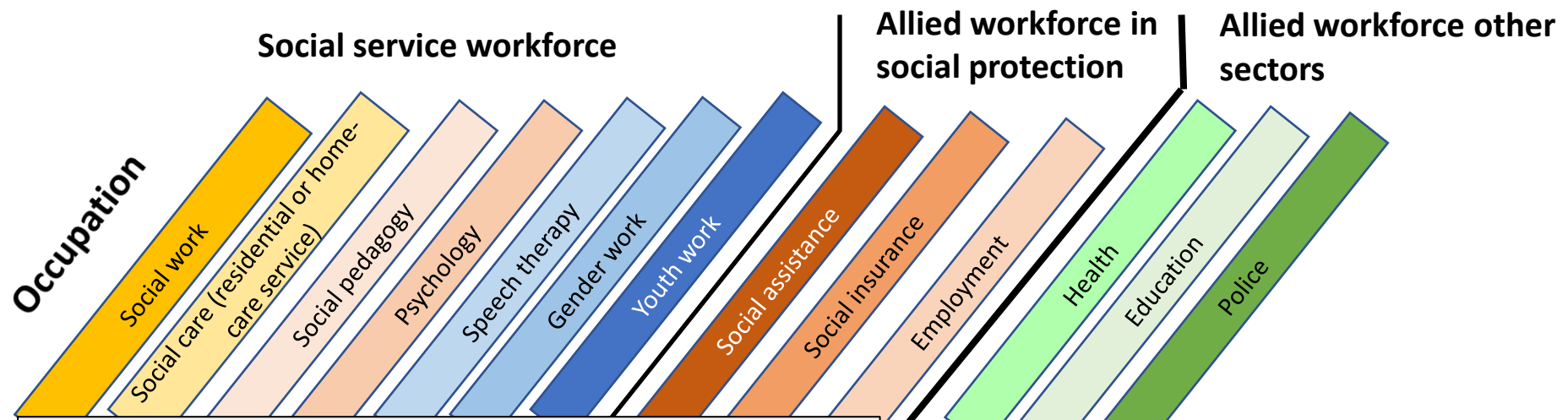
Services to support children with disabilities in their families to maximise functioning, inclusion and participation in quality education in their communities without having to leave their families

Specialised services – e.g. care leavers, children on the move …

Inter-sectoral gatekeeping commissions – child protection, disability (pedagogical-medical commissions), education, health, housing

Workforce and national competency-based training and education framework (social workers and other social service workforce)

SKRB 2024

Statutory decision-making – requires high level social work competencies

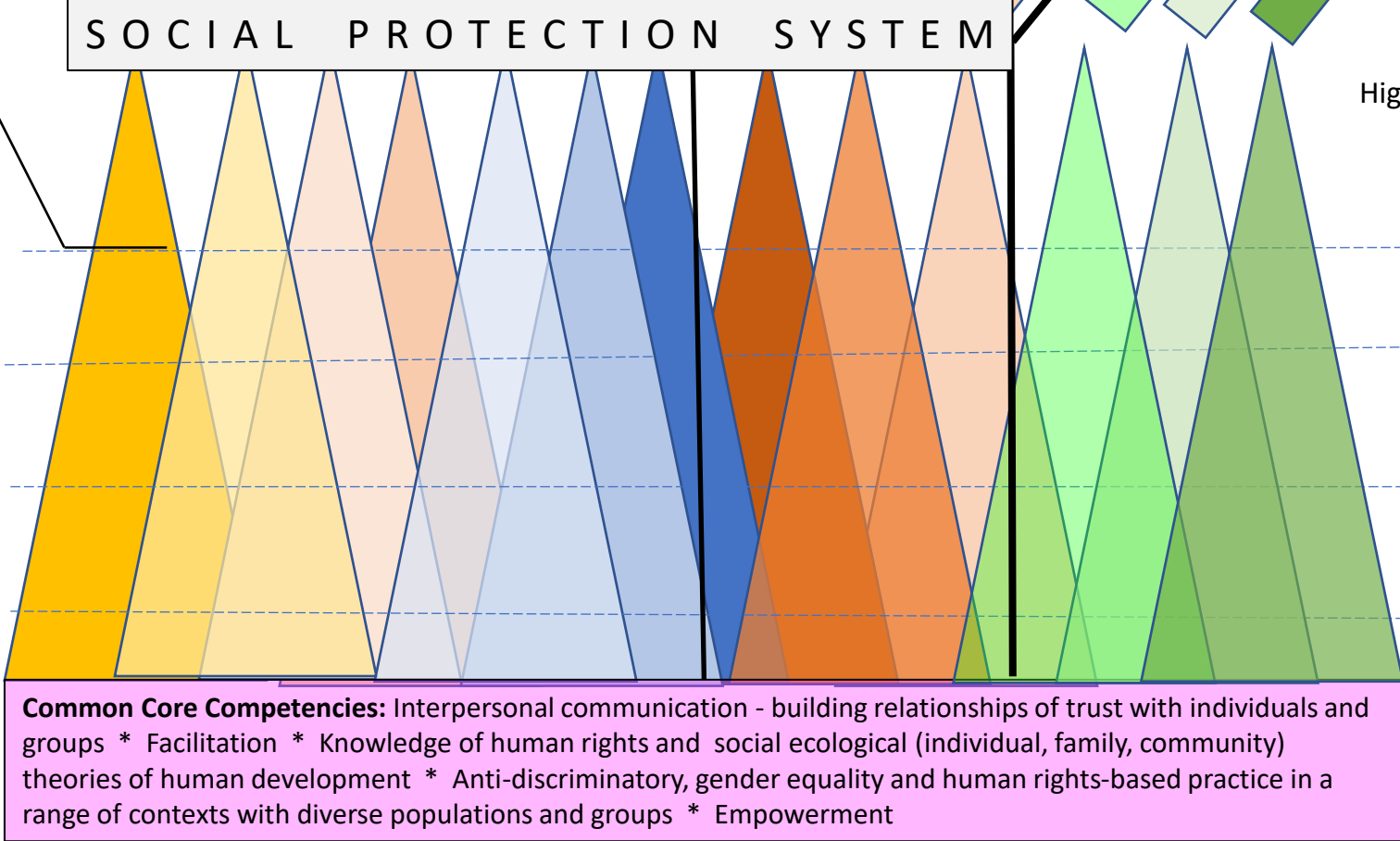**Occupational Level and Qualification**

4 — Professional / specialist (degree)

3 — Junior Specialist (Diploma Professional)

2 — Qualified Worker (Technical diploma)

1 — Paraprofessional (Certificate)

0 — Worker (Secondary education. Qualified by personal qualities and experience.)

Occupation

Social service workforce
- Social work
- Social care (residential or home-care service)
- Social pedagogy
- Psychology
- Speech therapy
- Gender work
- Youth work

Allied workforce in social protection
- Social assistance
- Social insurance
- Employment

Allied workforce other sectors
- Health
- Education
- Police

SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

Accountability and Responsibility

- Technical competencies High specialisation
- Complex secondary or tertiary level services
- Primary or secondary level services
- Primary level services
- Single function
- Core competencies. Little or no specialisation
- Implementation

Common Core Competencies: Interpersonal communication - building relationships of trust with individuals and groups * Facilitation * Knowledge of human rights and social ecological (individual, family, community) theories of human development * Anti-discriminatory, gender equality and human rights-based practice in a range of contexts with diverse populations and groups * Empowerment

SKRB 2024

Social worker

Purpose: rights realization, prevention, protection, inclusion

Functions

- **Identification and outreach**
- **Needs assessment**
- **Individual support plan** including:
  - Information provision
  - Direct psychological support and counselling
  - Referrals to other services
- **Case management**
- **Protection** – children, adults with disabilities and older people, women, young people including care leavers
- **Family support**
- **Inclusion and participation** – children, youth and adults with disabilities, older people
  - Intersectoral mediation with health, education, employment, transport, housing
- **Early intervention** and early childhood support
- **Parenting support** and training
- **Youth work**

Other roles and responsibilities

- Monitoring and evaluation
- Community resource mobilization
- Service mapping and identification of gaps

SKRB 2024

Social Work and Social Service Workforce Strengthening

Planning

Planning: strategic approach to planning the workforce; data-driven decision-making; improve recruitment, hiring and deployment practices

Developing

Developing: align education and training with planning efforts; ensure curricula and teaching are aligned with policy goals and best practices; systematic continuous professional development

Supporting

Supporting: performance management systems; tools such as supervision for improving job satisfaction and retention; professional associations

SKRB 2024

Objectives of different types of systems

- Need for clarity of purpose in family support and child protection policy (McAlister, 2022)

- Low and high threshold systems of statutory family support and child protection – 'child protection' 'family service' and 'child development' (Gilbert, 2011)

- Strong universal services do not necessarily lead to better child protection outcomes; there is a need for individualised and needs-based, in-home services (Poso, 2014)

- 'Targeted universalism' – destigmatising family support and decoupling from child protection (Dolan et al, 2020)

- 'Thresholds' or 'windows' of need or risk (Children's Commissioner, 2017; Oxfordshire CC)

SKRB 2024

Essential components

- Competent workforce – social workers are a core professional
- Relationship-based social work – participation of child and family
- Multi-disciplinary teams
- Information sharing
- Integrated, good-quality assessments
- Decision-making by a competent authority
- Individually tailored, needs-based services and links to health, education, housing and other services

Next steps

Complete desk review - October 2024

Recruit External Reference Group (ERG) and Active Review and Reflection Group (ARG) – October 2024

First draft White Paper – November 2024

ERG and ARG review – December 2024

Key informant interviews and ARG country consultations – Jan-Feb 2025

Final draft White Paper – March 2025

ERG and ARG review and validation – April 2025

SKRB 2024

Would YOU like to join our ERG or ARG?

If you are an expert in statutory family support and child protection systems

OR

Represent a government that is interested in learning on these issues and translating learning into change ….

Please contact our consultant Martin Punaks to express your interest

mpunaks@unicef.org

SKRB
2024

Thank you!

SKRB 2024

Foto credit: UNICEF