

CARE2024 - Transforming Childcare Across Europe

A Call to Action

We, the Heads and Members of Delegations, gathered on 18-20 September 2024, at the invitation of Croatia's Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation, UNICEF, the University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences and Center for Missing and Abused Children for the international conference CARE2024 - Transforming Childcare Across Europe:

Recognize that family separation and child institutionalization have a devastating impact not only on children's lives, but their long-term development and their future contributions to the society.

Reaffirm our commitment to take into account the best interests of the child, prevent children from being placed into institutional care; ensure transition of children from institutional care to quality community-based or family-based care and support their independent living and social integration.

Acknowledge that over the last few decades, European nations have made good progress towards this goal. Yet far too many children – at least 337,287 – or 277 children out of every 100,000 remain in institutional care today. Both national and international policies and their social protection of families and children needs to be more: accessible, evidence based, gender sensitive.

Accept that in order to meet these commitments – and ensure we are providing the best future possible not only for children and families, but for our societies and economies at large – we must take action now.

Realize that this is not an easy time to tackle social problems. Yet the same global crises that make it more difficult, such as pandemics, conflicts, economic instability and climate change, are the crises that underscore the very importance of responsibilities of all systems – education, health, social and child protection and justice). These crises exacerbate issues such as poverty, migration, gender-based violence, mental health problems, and substance abuse. Responding to these challenges requires an integrated, multisectoral approach that not only addresses the symptoms, but the root causes, underscoring the importance of advocating for social justice, community development, and comprehensive supportive services.

Remind governments and partners of our commitments to protecting the rights of children and families, as laid out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Recall that the Members of the United Nations reaffirmed in the Charter their faith in fundamental human rights and in the dignity and worth of the human person and are determined

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. Furthermore, we remind all Member States that the United Nations, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed that children have the right to special care and assistance so that they can fully assume responsibilities within society.

Call on all governments, as well as non-government stakeholders, to act urgently to ensure that no child is placed in alternative care because of poverty, disability or challenging behaviour, or because their family lacks access to services they need to care for their own child at home. In the rare occasions when alternative care is in the child's best interests, it should always be family- or community- based.

To this end, **we urge all Governments and stakeholders to undertake the following actions:**

- I. **Design and implement effective childcare reforms** based on international commitments to keep children with their families where possible. They should plan for the gradual closure of large-scale institutions and the development of a comprehensive continuum of child and family support and protection services. This means reallocating resources from today's residential facilities for children to high-quality family support services, family- and community-based alternative care and inclusive education.
- II. **Invest in the development of a range of preventative and other child and family support services, including mental health and psychosocial support services, as well as a strong social service workforce**, for the early identification of, and intervention in, situations when children are at risk of separation. Authorities across Europe need to increase the number and working conditions of trained, community based social workers and other professionals who work with parents, caregivers, children at risk of family separation or in alternative care.
- III. **Ensure that alternative care is high-quality, and family based.** This includes strengthening support for extended family members who care for children, ensuring they have the resources and guidance they need; investing in the development and improvement of foster care services; and implementing strategies to keep siblings together where possible, recognizing the importance of family bonds for child development.
- IV. **Ensure that children who are already in alternative care** are protected against violence, neglect and abuse and have access to high-quality support services. This includes robust safeguarding policies and practices (such as safe channels for the reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse), returning children to their families wherever possible, or finding other appropriate, safe permanent family-based solutions.
- V. **Reduce the capacities of all large- scale residential facilities for children to the minimum by 2030** and use them only for short-term accommodation in crisis situations when the safety and health of the child is at risk and as a measure of last resort for no more than 20% of children in alternative care.
- VI. **Invest in more and better data on children who are at risk of family separation, in alternative care or who have left care.** Countries are encouraged to increase investment in the availability, quality and international comparability of data on family support and alternative care by strengthening administrative data collection and management systems and integrating them with other information management systems related to

children's well-being. Importantly, children in alternative care and care leavers should be incorporated into national surveys and censuses in whatever feasible way.

- VII. **Raise public awareness of the benefits and services of keeping families together, including online** and the urgent need to prioritize family-based care, using robust data and other evidence, including examples of best practice, and sharing family- and child-friendly information on the services and support that is available.
- VIII. **Ensure that children have a voice** in the decisions that affect them and are consulted when new policies and practices are developed to meet their needs and rights.

This Call to Action will lay the groundwork for the drafting of the commitment of Republic of Croatia for the participation on Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children to be held in November 2024 in Bogota, Colombia.

This Call to Action was agreed in Zagreb, Croatia on 20th September 2024 in a single original copy in English.