



Protecting Children in the Digital Age: Governance, Accountability, and a Shared Language to Prevent Exploitation

Panel Discussion

16 February 2026 | Sharjah

On 16 February 2026, Pearl Initiative's Governance in Philanthropy Programme participated as a Community and Outreach Partner in a regional dialogue convened by the Khalid bin Sultan Al Qasimi Humanitarian Foundation (KSQF) in partnership with ECPAT International at the House of Wisdom in Sharjah.

The event marked the launch of a landmark initiative to translate and culturally localise internationally recognised terminology on child protection into Arabic for the first time. Bringing together policymakers, practitioners, media representatives, private sector actors, and philanthropic foundations, the dialogue explored how shared terminology can strengthen child protection systems across the Arab region by improving legal clarity, professional practice, reporting standards, and coordinated responses.

As part of the programme, Pearl Initiative contributed through panel participation and targeted outreach, highlighting governance as a critical lens through which language, accountability, and institutional responsibility intersect. The discussion emphasised how clear and locally grounded terminology enables organisations to recognise risks, strengthen safeguarding systems, and move from intention toward measurable protection outcomes.

Key themes

1. Shared Understanding as Foundational to Good Governance

A central theme emerging from the panel discussion was that governance depends on shared understanding. Institutions cannot effectively respond to risks they cannot clearly name or define. Harmonised terminology creates the foundation for accountability by enabling consistent reporting, ethical communication, and coordinated action across sectors. Clear terminology allows organisations to identify harm, measure progress, and align decision-making with child protection standards. Without shared language, gaps in understanding can translate into gaps in protection. Ultimately, clear language shapes clear action. What we choose to name we choose to protect.

2. Developing an Organizational Culture of Governance

Discussions reinforced that safeguarding cannot rely solely on policies or public commitments. Effective governance requires embedding child protection as an organisational culture reflected in daily decisions, incentives, and accountability mechanisms. Internal reflection is especially valuable here, including audits of organisational structures, policies, and decision-making processes to assess whether institutions are truly equipped to protect children.



3. **Accountability through Systems and Processes**

A recurring insight was that responsible governance creates pathways for action. Reporting systems, safeguarding mechanisms, and feedback structures must function in ways that provide clear routes for response and support.

Additionally, governance systems should be forward-looking, integrating risk awareness and futures thinking not only to anticipate emerging harms but also to intentionally design policies, processes, and accountability structures that enable a future where all children are protected and able to thrive.

4. **Centring Those Most Affected in Decision-Making**

Another key theme was the importance of ensuring that governance structures reflect lived realities. Child protection systems must meaningfully consider how children actually engage with digital platforms, technologies, and social environments. Governance frameworks are most effective when decision-making incorporates the perspectives of those most affected. This requires participatory approaches, ethical engagement practices, and systems designed to prioritise protection outcomes over short-term wins.

5. **Cross-Sector Responsibility and Collective Governance**

The discussion highlighted that child protection is not confined to humanitarian or civil society actors. Private sector organisations, media institutions, and philanthropic actors all play a role in shaping safe environments. Shared terminology can help companies recognise their responsibilities within broader accountability ecosystems, enabling collaboration across business, philanthropy, and civil society. Governance is a shared responsibility requiring coordinated action rather than isolated institutional efforts.

Practical Takeaways for Organizations

1. **Establish shared terminology internally:** Align organisational language with recognised child protection standards to enable consistent reporting and decision-making.
2. **Conduct governance and safeguarding audits:** Review policies, systems, and operational practices to assess institutional readiness and capacity.
3. **Embed accountability mechanisms:** Develop clear reporting pathways, feedback systems, and measurable indicators linked to protection outcomes.
4. **Adopt participatory governance approaches:** Ensure that policies and programmes reflect the realities and experiences of children and affected communities.
5. **Move from commitments to systems and processes:** Translate public pledges into operational processes supported by organizational culture, monitoring, continuous learning, and feedback loops.



Closing Reflection

The conversations demonstrated that governance plays a foundational role in child protection by shaping how institutions understand risk, assume responsibility, and act collectively. When language is clear and locally grounded, it enables organisations to move from ambiguity toward accountability and from awareness toward action.

The Governance in Philanthropy Programme's participation reinforced the importance of governance as both a tool and a culture. By supporting shared understanding, strengthening institutional systems, and encouraging cross-sector collaboration, governance helps create environments where children are not left without recourse but are supported by structures designed to protect and uphold their rights.