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Oral report background note

The approach of UNICEF to capacity development

Summary

This background note to the oral report presented at the 2010 second regular session of the Executive Board describes how UNICEF, in close collaboration with partners, supports the development of the capacity of national and subnational government institutions and civil society organizations, community groups, families and caregivers to address gaps and disparities related to the realization of the rights of children and women in development and humanitarian contexts. The note summarizes key constraints and lessons learned, and concludes with indications of the ways forward.

* E/ICEF/2010/15.

Capacity development: a priority for UNICEF and the international community

1. Capacity development is a process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to achieve their own development objectives.¹ The United Nations Development Group (UNDG) has recognized capacity development as one of five key principles for United Nations country programming – alongside a human rights-based approach, gender equality, environmental sustainability and results-based management². Because of its centrality to the development process, including national goals and strategies, and to achieving the Millennium Development Goals with equity, capacity development is one of the core priorities of UNICEF. The UNICEF medium-term strategic plan (MTSP) for 2006-2013 requires all offices to provide “continued support for building national capacities to fulfil children’s rights, with increased emphasis on strengthening policy frameworks, service delivery and protection systems and institutions.”³

2. The United Nations General Assembly has also underscored that capacity development is a key strategy to achieving internationally agreed goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. The triennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (resolution 62/208 of 19 December 2007) recognized the importance of capacity development and ownership of national development strategies to achievement of these goals. The resolution called upon the United Nations organizations “to provide further support to the efforts of developing countries to establish and/or maintain effective national institutions and to support the implementation and, as necessary, the devising of national strategies for capacity-building”. Furthermore, the 2010 report of the Secretary-General on achieving the Millennium Development Goals concluded that “countries should ...be encouraged to design and implement their own development strategies and to strengthen their domestic capacities. Global partnerships should support such national development strategies and domestic capacities”.⁴

3. The international community has also repeatedly emphasized the need for a high level of commitment to capacity-building for sustainable development and humanitarian action.⁵ The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness commits partner countries to “integrate specific capacity strengthening objectives in national development strategies and pursue their implementation through country-led capacity development strategies where needed”. Regarding capacity development in fragile states, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Guiding Principles for Early Recovery⁶ emphasize national ownership and the strengthening of local and national capacities throughout the recovery period. The Hyogo Framework for

¹ As outlined by UNICEF in the Annual report to the Economic and Social Council (E/2010/6–E/ICEF/2010/3).

² See “Application of the Programming Principles to the UNDAF” (Guidance note of UNDG, January, 2010).

³ See the UNICEF medium-term strategic plan, 2006-2009 (E/ICEF/2005/11). The plan was extended through 2013 in Executive Board decision 2009/5. The midterm review of the MTSP was reported on in 2009 (E/ICEF/2008/18) and the in-depth review of the MTSP was reported on in 2010 (E/ICEF/2010/9).

⁴ “Keeping the promise: a forward-looking review to promote an agreed action agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015”. Report of the Secretary-General, 12 February 2010 (A/64/665).

⁵ This is expressed through: the Accra Agenda for Action (2008), the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2007), and the policy paper of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, “The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working Towards Good Practice” (2006).

⁶ Cluster Working Group on Early Recovery, Guidance Note on Early Recovery (April 2008).

Action also recognizes capacity development as a guiding principle facilitating effective disaster risk reduction⁷.

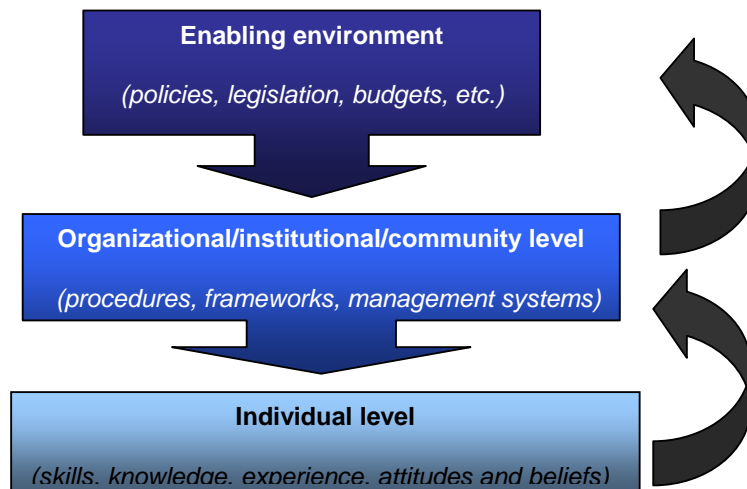
I. Strategic framework and dimensions of capacity development

4. Capacity development is essential to ensuring the sustainability of development. Policy makers, national institutions, civil society organizations, communities, families and individuals all require certain capacities in order to plan, manage and utilize services, make decisions and take actions that support the realization of the rights of children and women. In humanitarian contexts, including fragile states and countries exposed to disasters, capacity development is of particular importance in ensuring an adequate level of preparedness and an effective response.

5. The UNDG has identified three interrelated levels of capacity in the country context (see figure 1).

6. **Individual level.** Individual capacities include specific areas of expertise in a particular sector – for example, skills of teachers, health workers and other service provider

Figure 1. Levels of capacity



Source: Adapted from “A Collective Approach to Capacity Development” (UNDG, 2009)

s. These capacities also encompass the competencies of system managers, planners and decision makers at both subnational and national levels. Intrapersonal and communication skills, as well as attitudes and beliefs, also influence the practices and decisions of parents, service-providers, community leaders, planners and policy makers – and the achievement of sustained improvements in the lives of children, including the poorest and most vulnerable among them.

7. **Organizational, institutional and community level.** The efficiency and effectiveness of a broad range of procedures, processes and systems affect the ability of

⁷United Nations/International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, “Words Into Action: A Guide for Implementing the Hyogo Framework” (30 April 2007).

countries to realize the rights of children and women. In addition to the capacity of relevant government institutions at all levels, the capacity and role of civil society organizations are often an important factor in addressing disparities and making sustained progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The quality and inclusiveness of community-level activities influence whether disadvantaged children can access social services and be protected, thereby increasing their opportunities to survive and develop their own capacities.

8. **Enabling environment.** This level of capacity, which includes the policy framework, allocation of public resources and societal norms, is also crucial to achieving progress in development. Broadening the level of participation of stakeholders in planning and policy-making helps ensure that a system is responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society and that it safeguards their rights.

II. The approach of UNICEF

9. The approach of UNICEF to capacity development at national and local levels in many countries has focused on strengthening the process of assessing, analysing and taking action to promote the realization of the rights of children and women.⁸ Below are several examples of how UNICEF is supporting capacity development in this way at the three levels: (a) individual; (b) organizational, institutional and community; and (c) enabling environment.

10. One good illustration of a comprehensive approach that includes training of key individuals is that taken in West Bengal, India, where UNICEF supports capacity development initiatives within the Community-Based Disaster Preparedness (CBDP) programme, begun in 2001. In this programme, UNICEF works closely with community members, district administrators and with national government counterparts on a comprehensive approach. The programme targets the improvement of capacities in the following areas identified as crucial for flood-preparedness: coordination of preparedness plans at different levels, maintaining the early warning system, and contingency planning. These efforts were replicated at the community level through participatory approaches.

11. The CBDP programme has achieved significant results. The data for disasters in West Bengal since 2000 indicate a reduction in the loss of lives and also improvements in the protection of assets. Communities on the whole have become more resilient in managing and surviving the initial days of floods. A 2007 evaluation referred to the CBDP as a “true life-saving strategy” and found that “across 10 villages in three districts...communities reported that the main gains were no deaths or missing persons since inception of CBDP”.⁹ The previously observed post-flood water-borne disease rates dropped dramatically and women and men were able to administer oral rehydration salts to children if any episode of diarrhoea occurred. Moreover, evidence from this approach has helped to create a conducive policy environment by contributing to the strategic decisions and policy shifts made in order to extend and replicate the community-based approach in other districts.

⁸ For additional information on this approach, see Urban Jonsson, “Human Rights Based Approach to Development Programming” (UNICEF Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa, 2003).

⁹ “UNICEF-led Community Based Disaster Preparedness in West Bengal, India: Final Report” (external evaluation by RedR India, 2007).

12. An example of capacity development at the institutional level is the support UNICEF provides to networks of civil society organizations in Mozambique. In this capacity development initiative with civil society, UNICEF works with United Nations partners, the Ministry of Justice and non-governmental organizations. The initiative, which facilitates joint advocacy and knowledge-sharing between organizations and communities, among other activities, has reached more than 100 districts and involves over 300 civil society organizations. A key strategy is to strengthen the capacity of partners to promote the involvement of young people, including in social mobilization activities. The programme has enhanced advocacy and collaborative networks that have helped to influence policy makers to develop legal instruments with a significant impact on children and women. These instruments include the 2008 Children's Act and the 2009 Law on Domestic Violence against Women.

13. A strong example of capacity development at the policy level comes from Ecuador, where UNICEF has been engaged in budget analysis and supporting the national budgeting process since 1999, including support for the establishment of an Observatory of Fiscal Policy in 2002. These activities have helped to increase awareness of the need to invest in children and to increase social expenditures. A quadrupling of the social budget followed the establishment of the Observatory and other key developments. Through the efforts of UNICEF and its partners, more citizens, including young people, are now engaged in promoting child-friendly, gender responsive and pro-poor budgets. These efforts are complemented by the Child-Friendly Cities approach, which helps local municipalities to address their capacity constraints in reaching the poorest children through budgetary and policy initiatives.

14. The support UNICEF provides to national capacity development strategies often includes a combination of cooperation efforts involving the following:

- (a) Strengthen key national institutions for the rights of children and women, through the provision of human, material and financial resources;
- (b) Transfer knowledge through training, on-the-job skills transfer, mentoring, inter-country exchange, and technical assistance;
- (c) Strengthen national and local policies, planning and monitoring in favour of children and the most disadvantaged, including support to the review and implementation of laws, administrative practices, and regulations relating to children and women;
- (d) Strengthen processes that enable the participation of young people in making decisions that affect them and that enable community-led solutions;
- (e) Influence attitudes, values, organizational cultures, and incentive structures in the best interests of children, including through information, education and communication;
- (f) Introduce new technologies for effective service delivery and support the strengthening of delivery approaches and of organizational and management systems;
- (g) Strengthen accountability, coordination and representation mechanisms;
- (h) Enhance the knowledge and skills of children and women themselves.

15. The approach to capacity development in each country is built on a consensus achieved among partners on priorities related to the realization of the rights of children and women, and on analysis of the immediate, underlying and basic causes of the capacity gaps. Close collaboration with partners, including other United Nations agencies, bilateral institutions, academia, civil society and community groups, is critically important to ensuring an effective and comprehensive approach.

16. According to UNDG guidelines,¹⁰ five steps should be followed to integrate capacity development into the country programming process:

- (a) Engage with partners and communities to build consensus and promote national and local ownership;
- (b) Jointly assess capacity assets and gaps;
- (c) Jointly design capacity development strategies;
- (d) Support the implementation of capacity development interventions;
- (e) Evaluate capacity development efforts.

III. Constraints and lessons learned

17. The concept of capacity development has broadened from being an externally driven, narrow focus on human resource development to a more systemic approach that is inclusive of a wider range of national and local partners and key actors. To better understand its role in this evolving field, UNICEF in 2009 commissioned a desk review of its efforts in capacity development.¹¹ The review found that UNICEF often took an approach that was ad hoc and focused on a limited set of actors and capacities (such as the skills of service providers) rather than on promoting systemic changes and strengthening institutions. Moreover, the levels of stakeholder participation and emphasis on promoting local ownership in various initiatives varied too greatly. With some notable exceptions, there was insufficient emphasis on human rights-based approaches, gender mainstreaming and the promotion of participation.

18. There are two key constraints to adopting a more systemic approach. First, in some countries and contexts, UNICEF has limited technical and financial capacity to support the analytical process that should underpin this approach. This lack of capacity has in some cases required choosing between – and phasing of – various interventions. Second, in some instances, UNICEF has faced challenges in ensuring a consistent, longer-term engagement required by a systemic approach. Nevertheless, UNICEF does have sufficient financial and technical capacity in a number of areas in which it has worked for a long time – for example, in supporting national and local efforts to end female genital mutilation/cutting.

19. It is critical to take a systemic approach in order to contribute to sustainable progress on the MDGs. UNICEF needs to promote an enabling environment, helping to integrate

¹⁰ Adapted from the draft “Technical Brief on Programming Principles” (UNDG, 2010).

¹¹ “UNICEF: Approaches to Capacity Development - A Desk Review Report” (UNICEF Division of Policy and Practice, October 2009). See also: “UNICEF Study on National capacity Development for humanitarian Action: Issues Paper”, by Katherine Mahoney and Shaula Bellour (November 2008).

capacity development in the national planning and programming processes.¹² Countries that fulfil the rights of children and women on an equitable and sustained basis have succeeded because of a strong commitment to build the required national capacities systemically at all levels.

20. Another lesson learned is that a holistic approach is required. As noted in section II, the three levels of capacity are interrelated. The capacity gaps related to the policy environment and governance issues can influence the effectiveness of institutions, organizations and processes at the community level. A holistic approach needs to be based on the analysis of capacity gaps, including disparities, within each context. Support provided in the short term (such as the training of individuals, provision of supplies and advocacy with decision makers) should be consistent with a longer-term approach that helps countries in addressing the related structural and systemic issues, including public sector reform. The knowledge and skills enhanced through training may often need to be complemented by changes in the incentive and support systems to facilitate the practice of the acquired skills.

21. Last, capacity development is an iterative process of design-application-learning-adjustment¹³. Critical to the success of cooperation and to generating knowledge are (a) the monitoring of indicators related to changes in capacity during implementation, (b) the making of adjustments as required, and (c) the evaluation of results to inform future approaches. It is important to develop indicators related to process (including behavioural change), output and outcome in order to assess the effectiveness of capacity development approaches against baselines of existing capacities and targets for their strengthening. The results of monitoring and evaluation should feed into national and subnational monitoring systems for national and sector plans. Support should also be provided to facilitate the meaningful participation of stakeholders.

IV. Ways forward

22. The following actions will be taken to strengthen the effectiveness of UNICEF cooperation in capacity development, building on the framework advocated by UNDG, the approach outlined by UNICEF, and the lessons learned to date.

(a) **Adopt a more systematic, holistic approach to capacity development through enhanced UNICEF programme guidance and capacity.** Programme guidance will emphasize the following elements:

- (i) Paying greater attention to facilitating participatory, high-quality analyses by national and local partners of relevant capacity gaps for the rights of children and women, as part of the situation analysis and other processes, in partnership with other United Nations agencies and other stakeholders;
- (ii) Adopting a systemic, comprehensive approach to capacity development that is appropriate for each context, with relevant indicators defined to measure progress and make adjustments as required;

¹² “Keeping the promise: a forward-looking review to promote an agreed action agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015” Report of the Secretary-General, 12 February 2010. (A/64/665).

¹³ Adapted from the approach of the United Nations Development Programme (www.undp.org/capacity development/our approach).

- (iii) Ensuring that support to strengthening individual capacities is mainstreamed into existing capacity development initiatives, such as pre-service and in-service training and communication for development, and that it is sustainable and given at significant scale;
- (iv) Paying attention to strengthening the capacity of those responsible for promoting development results and the rights of children and women through communication and social mobilization strategies that appropriately include the involvement of children and women in planning and decision-making at all levels;
- (v) Continuing strong partnership with Governments, focusing more strategically on capacity development, and enhanced partnerships with other United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and community groups;
- (vi) Further enhancing the capacity of UNICEF itself to effectively support capacity development approaches, including through better integrating skills and competencies of staff into existing UNICEF staff development activities;

(b) **Ensure adequate focus on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and women by analysing and addressing the capacity gaps related to context-specific disparities at all levels.** Greater emphasis will be placed on contributing to the sustained achievement of the MDGs and reducing disparities and vulnerabilities, to ensure a consistently high-quality, comprehensive approach that proactively strengthens the critical capacities required to address disparities;

(c) **Strengthen the monitoring and evaluation system.** Based on agreed standards, the monitoring, evaluation and performance management system will be enhanced to promote the generation and use of information on the implementation and results achieved from capacity development approaches. The ongoing analysis of progress will inform review and planning processes at all levels;

(d) **Share evidence and lessons learned more systematically through enhanced knowledge management systems and practices.** UNICEF will work to enhance knowledge generation, which will encompass the greater sharing of evidence and lessons learned related to the costing and effectiveness of capacity development initiatives in various contexts. Efforts will include promoting South-South knowledge transfer and learning. Analysing progress achieved and exchanging lessons learned in relation to implementing a more comprehensive approach to capacity development will be included in relevant management meetings, partnership and inter-governmental forums.
