

UNICEF child protection strategy: oral report

I. Introduction

1. Child protection is an issue in every country and a high priority for UNICEF. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children have the right to be assured of their protection from various forms of harm. Weak child protection manifests itself in many ways, including through sexual abuse and exploitation, trafficking, child labour, violence, the use of children as soldiers and other conflict-related harm, harmful practices, such as female genital cutting and child marriage, lack of access to justice, and unnecessary institutionalization, among others. These forms of harm and abuse can add to poverty and conflict and increase the likelihood that successive generations will face similar risks.

2. Previous protection discussions at the Executive Board¹ emphasized that child protection is an integral part of, and represents an important UNICEF contribution to, the fulfilment of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals. In addition, a particularly important commitment UNICEF has made is to follow up on the recommendations of the Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, which documented the scale and scope of such violence, and its consequences, in several settings.

3. The 2006 country office annual reports and the UNICEF "Global Thematic Report on Child Protection" illustrate a significantly increased uptake in child protection work, with progress reported in child labour reduction; expanded birth registration; child-care system reform; legal reform, including in the area of juvenile justice; and data collection, research and monitoring. Ratification of protection-related international instruments advanced, as did the development of inter-agency technical guidance on several issues. A gradual shift is under way towards understanding child protection as strengthening systemic and societal support for protective laws, policies and social conventions. UNICEF is reviewing all child protection evaluations of the past five years to distil the most important lessons. The third round of multiple indicator cluster (household) surveys will provide a number of child protection baselines for the first time.

4. UNICEF work in child protection is expanding, and a more detailed supporting strategy is timely. While fundamental changes are not being proposed to the organization's underlying approach to protection, notably the emphasis on prevention, we want to place our investment strategically, where UNICEF can add the greatest value. This report sets out key components proposed in support of UNICEF child protection work, for further discussion at the first regular session of the Executive Board in January 2008.

* E/ICEF/2007/13.

¹ On children and armed conflict in 2003, child trafficking in 2004, child protection in 2005, justice for children in 2006, and child protection components of the UNICEF medium-term strategic plans.

II. Results

5. The overarching result sought by child protection – the vision – is that all children grow up in a protective environment, understood as being an environment where they are assured protection from violence, exploitation and unnecessary separation from family. The emphasis is on prevention, and on reliable responses to situations where protection has broken down or does not exist. In the current medium-term strategic plan (MTSP), the key child protection results are expressed as:

(a) government decisions influenced by increased awareness of child protection rights and improved data, and improved data and analysis on child protection;

(b) effective legislative and enforcement systems and improved protection and response capacity;

(c) better protection from the impact of armed conflict and natural disasters (as per the Core Commitments for Children in Emergencies);

(d) children better served by justice systems that ensure greater protection for children as victims, witnesses and offenders;

(e) children and families identified as vulnerable reached by key community and government services aimed at reducing children's and families' marginalization.

6. These remain our intended results, to which we would add increased corporate social responsibility in respect of child protection.

III. Strategic approach

7. The approach of strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors for children, on a broad scale – the Protective Environment Framework – was introduced during the 2002-2005 MTSP period.² Shifting our focus from projects for specific groups to a more comprehensive approach of supporting change in political, social and institutional environments is consistent with current approaches to aid effectiveness. The overarching strategic intent of this priority is to:

(a) strengthen national protection systems, supporting capacity through the core responsibilities of the social welfare and justice sectors, as well as through other relevant sectors;

(b) support positive social change, mobilizing communities, partners and children themselves to reinforce a culture of child protection in all societies;

(c) strengthen child protection in conflict and emergencies.

8. Understood through a human rights lens, “protection” is not purely a crisis response or short-term intervention for children who have already been victimized, but rather actions which

² The Framework identifies eight broad elements as being critical to determining children's protection: government commitment and capacity; legislation and implementation; attitudes and practices; open discussion; children's participation and life skills; capacity of those closest to the child; services (basic and targeted); and monitoring and oversight. These can guide situation analyses and are applicable across the wide range of child protection issues, which can otherwise appear to have little in common.

serve to reduce vulnerability and risk in order to prevent harm. The UNICEF focus has shifted from projects for specific groups to a more comprehensive approach of supporting change in social and institutional environments. Supporting sustained national capacities for child protection is by definition a scaling-up strategy. Small-scale and short-term responses have saved the lives of many children, and remain essential, but should form part of broader strategies that aim to prevent harm and reduce ad hoc responses. Greater coordination among partners on the ground and among sectors is needed for the design and implementation of such strategies.

9. UNICEF has contributed to hundreds of child protection programmes and projects around the world, with a range of partners unparalleled in any other area of activity. For the most part, UNICEF technical and advocacy support has been framed around particular forms of harm or vulnerability – child trafficking, female genital cutting, disability or children separated from their caregivers, for example. Different categories of at-risk children frequently overlap, however, and the same basic systems need to be in place to support prevention, as well as detection and response to most forms of risk. While the measures needed to support Governments and communities to strengthen the protective environment for children may not be uniform from one place to the next, all countries need to be clear on their statutory responsibilities towards children, and to have systems, capacities and resources to respond. The elements set out below are priorities in the ongoing strengthening of the UNICEF child protection role.

10. **Strengthen national child protection systems.** The use of the term “systems” is intended to promote a holistic view of child protection. The Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children recommends that all States develop a systematic and multifaceted framework for the protection of children and integrate this into national planning. Social welfare and justice have emerged as the core counterpart sectors for child protection: often, support is given to a range of related actions such as law, policy, the development of professional capacity, the development of community-based services and coordination between sectors. UNICEF has supported mapping exercises/capacity assessments for social welfare and for justice, reviewing statutes and policies, and identifying gaps, with a view to prioritizing preventive measures and standardizing procedures. Such exercises, which have gained force in the past five years, can illuminate whether or not the most vulnerable children and families are able to find out about, and access, the services they need, including legal protection.

11. The health and education sectors are especially critical to child protection systems, with their strategic areas of intervention, including professional development and codes of conduct, oversight and regulation, and service provision. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) engagement as one of three core partners supporting the study on violence illustrated the important role of public health to child protection.

12. **Supporting social change.** The Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children found societal acceptance of violence against children a significant factor in the scale, scope and underreporting of such violence. Where protective legislation is at odds with social consensus, the impact of laws alone may be limited. Examples of supporting social change include working with communities towards a review of prevailing social norms, including those that reinforce gender discrimination, working with parenting programmes for early childhood development and working with young people on their life skills. While some programmes have been the subject of considerable evaluation, this is not always the case, and in general much remains to be learned about how best to support long-term protection-related social and behavioural strategies.

13. Two areas important to child protection are adolescent development and participation and the private sector. The role of young people in protection and advocacy is becoming more evident and more visible. Adolescents face acute protection challenges, and have been among the most effective advocates for ending violence against children and reducing the impact of armed conflict. The private sector, particularly multinational corporations, is a key actor in child protection, offering promising examples of reducing and eliminating the use of children in manufacturing, agriculture and extractive industries, of eliminating the sexual exploitation of children in connection with travel and tourism, and of ending the sale of images of child abuse. In many cases, companies have taken initiatives to prevent the exploitation of children within the private sector and to use the influence of the sector to act as lobbyists, advocates and advertisers. Corporate responsibility is important in both developing and developed countries and in situations of conflict. For these reasons, UNICEF seeks an expanded dialogue with private sector partners at the global level, with multinational corporations, and at the regional and field office level, with local enterprises with an emphasis on promoting good practices.

14. **Strengthen child protection in conflict and emergencies.** Children suffer appalling abuses in conflict and increased vulnerability to harm in any emergency. International standards have developed and become more explicit about the nature of protection required, including the differentiation of risks and responses by gender (for example, the Paris Principles and Commitments of February 2007). Broad awareness of such risks has increased. In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, for example, Governments were quickly alert to the heightened risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking of children. Attention paid to this risk has also increased at the highest political level, through the reports and mechanisms of the Security Council, for example. Civil society organizations have played a vital role in maintaining attention and pressure. The continued failures to protect children in conflict, the abuses and harms (including those from landmines, small arms and explosive remnants of war) that persist after conflicts have ostensibly ended, and the rise in gang violence linked to armed conflict all underline the continued need to give high priority to strengthening child protection in conflict and emergencies.

15. Immediately after the 2004 tsunami, UNICEF took a lead role in convening experts, partners and others who work with children and in obtaining consensus on the care and protection of separated children (working with the Working Group on Separated Children) and on psychosocial response. The role of child protection in the tsunami response has been evaluated positively. A study is currently being conducted to assess the application of the Protective Environment Framework in emergencies, with a view to developing broad-based strategies for child protection in such situations.

IV. Institutional response

16. UNICEF proposes to give increased priority to strengthening the following institutional capacities.

17. **Knowledge and its use.** A good child protection programme will have sound analysis as its foundation, using quantitative data, surveys, studies and observation. Stronger situation analyses should be complemented by evidence-based approaches in the design of programmes. Evidence of impact is increasingly being captured across different sectors, as the Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children has illustrated; however, data in many areas remain a challenge. UNICEF needs to maintain strong links to research and other institutions and to research-related networks, among other partnerships, in order to maintain an active overview of such evidence and its

dissemination and to identify future research needs. Such efforts will require a commitment to the quest for better evidence and for strong evaluations of impact.

18. The Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children has recommended developing and implementing systematic national data collection and research, and UNICEF country reports show growth in this area. With stepped-up action nationally and globally, including through MTSP focus area 5, there is a wealth of recent data in child protection. Since 2002, UNICEF has worked with partners to agree and introduce several standardized child protection indicators, and the DevInfo data collection system is being expanded to include some child protection data. Nevertheless, many data and evidence gaps remain. In seeking to support the capacities of Governments and partners themselves to collect data and apply information tools, UNICEF will need to strengthen its own capacities and programming.

19. **Technical guidance.** Technical guidance is an important function for translating approaches that are based on human rights and evidence into policy, legislative and practical measures that can be undertaken by Governments and other partners. An overview of child protection evaluations is under way, examining interventions that have been effective in reducing children's vulnerability, and in strengthening protective factors. Most important is that we and our partners adopt **common** technical guidance. Where partners in emergency response lack an agreed approach to separated children, or to psychosocial response, for example, the result is incoherent and wasteful. All our actions on the ground also represent a form of advocacy. Where different actors adopt radically different approaches to institutional care, for example, a clear national policy may be lost to disparate facts on the ground. Sound technical guidance is closely linked to **strengthened knowledge** and to **convening and partnering** (below). As part of the child protection strategy, UNICEF and its partners will review areas in which technical guidance is a priority.

20. **Convening and partnering.** Child protection benefits from an array of committed partners. Every child protection issue has a network or coordinating group, from the Better Care Network with over 1,000 members to the small Inter-agency Coordinating Panel on Juvenile Justice, both supported by UNICEF. Coordination and common technical standards and approaches are both essential to preventing children from slipping through the safety net of good protection. Internationally, UNICEF has helped broker numerous intercountry agreements with respect to child trafficking, and has coordinated study tours for government counterparts on responses to sexual violence, on birth registration, and on avoiding overuse of institutionalization, among other issues. Civil society organizations, parliamentarians, faith-based organizations and academia are important partners in child protection, as are other United Nations agencies.³ Strengthening multi-partner approaches will remain an important element in our overall strategy.

21. **Working with the private sector.** UNICEF has a strong history of engagement with the private sector, particularly multinational corporations, which is an important actor in child protection. The sector includes numerous companies and broad-based campaigns and codes of conduct. The importance of this sector is such that this work should not remain ad hoc and largely reactive. The private sector can play a valuable role in advocacy for child protection, social mobilization and data collection. Our strategy should consider the implications of working with local industries in addition to multinationals.

³ Notably the International Labour Organization, WHO, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the United Nations Development Programme, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

22. **Advocacy.** The advocacy element is contained in all the institutional approaches described in this report, and requires greater attention and prominence in our planning and in our capacities. The Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children is one example of a positive advocacy process. With the aim of consulting every region, preliminary discussions and studies took place. Among other useful outcomes, these discussions and studies created broader awareness of child protection issues and a knowledge base of shared experiences and promising practices. Child protection issues are global issues, and considerable protection-related advocacy takes place in wealthy countries. Many child protection topics have at some point been considered sensitive, and advocacy is essential to putting them on the government agenda. Taboos can inhibit protection, in particular when children feel unable to raise their concerns. International protection-related standards may also not be well known. Appropriate advocacy strategies taking into account all these considerations will form part of the UNICEF child protection strategy.

23. **Emergency response.** UNICEF's Core Commitments for Children in Emergencies were adopted in 2000 and revised in 2002. This area of work has been strengthened significantly. UNICEF participates in and supports implementation of new international standards and mechanisms, including the Integrated United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards. UNICEF also supports work on HIV/AIDS in emergencies and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, to be launched in September 2007. Efforts are also supported in the areas of landmines, small arms and explosive remnants of war, work on which is now joined to child protection. Within the humanitarian cluster approach, UNICEF is the lead agency for child protection globally. An assessment is currently under way on the applicability of longer-term thinking and the Protective Environment Framework to the child protection response in emergencies.

V. Conclusion

24. Over the past decade, child protection has risen higher not only on the UNICEF agenda but also on that of the international community. There is broad recognition that children in rich countries as well as poor can face protection risks, and of the cross-border nature of many protection issues. There is also greater recognition of the linkages between improved child protection and sustainable achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Nevertheless, incorporation of child protection into the wider development and humanitarian agenda can still be a challenge at country level.
