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Report on the field visit of members of the Bureau of the UNICEF Executive Board to Guyana, 30 May to 4 June 2004

1. Members of the Bureau of the UNICEF Executive Board travelled to Guyana from 30 May to 4 June for a field visit, the first ever made by members of the UNICEF Executive Board to the Caribbean. The main purpose of the visit was to give the Bureau members a first-hand experience of UNICEF work at the country level. More specifically, the visit aimed at showing the Bureau examples of how the country programme of cooperation implements the medium-term strategic plan (MTSP) priorities in support of government programmes in favour of children, women, families and communities and in partnership with other United Nations agencies, bilateral donors, and civil society organizations. Of particular interest for the delegates was the opportunity to visit projects relevant to the annual session of the Board and to the Board's recent discussions, such as those on orphans and other vulnerable children and joint programming as well as on general issues of partnerships.
2. This visit came at a particularly opportune time, considering on the one hand that the Government of Guyana and UNICEF had just finalized a mid-term review (MTR) process, and on the other hand that the United Nations country team was in the process of formulating the first draft of the second Common Country Assessment (CCA)/United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).
3. The programme of the visit comprised project site visits, including interactions with project stakeholders, as well as meetings with national officials (the President of the Republic and the Ministers of Health, Education, Labour, Human Services and Social Security, and Culture, Youth and Sports); the Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM); and the country teams of the United Nations and UNICEF.
4. Overall, this visit was successful in that it reached its main goal of informing Bureau members about challenges and opportunities in realizing the rights of children in Guyana and in implementing MTSP priorities. Given the high level of the delegation, the visit also offered an advocacy role for national stakeholders as well as a motivating function for communities, key agents and UNICEF staff.

* E/ICEF/2004/8.

5. This brief report will focus mainly on key lessons learned from the MTR process, from the exchange with the United Nations country team and CARICOM, and from observations, impressions and interactions from the project sites visits.

The MTR process

6. The MTR of the country programme of cooperation was concluded in December 2003. It was a thorough process that ensured maximum stakeholders' participation at all stages. In fact, this process was judged so successful that one national authority called it the "second success story", characterized as it was by government ownership and leadership of the process and a strong capacity-building component, which resulted in greater accountability on the part of national counterparts. The first success story is, of course, the achievements made in programme implementation.

7. Among key achievements, special mention must be made of the catalytic role of UNICEF-supported pilot projects in national expansion of programmes and government programme integration. For example, the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV project has been expanded for inclusion in a National Programme launched in 2003. Similarly, the *Escuela Nueva* and Child-Friendly Schools approach piloted through UNICEF support are now both included in the Education Strategic Plan and the Education for All Fast Track Initiative. In addition, the community-based Water and Environmental Sanitation approaches piloted by UNICEF have gained important recognition by the Guyana Water Incorporated. This will ensure their scaling up as well as sustainability.

8. Other important results of the programme include the establishment of the National Commission on the Rights of the Child, *Escuela Nueva* and Child-Friendly Schools, the development of Youth-Friendly Spaces, youth fairs in the prevention of HIV/AIDS, the establishment of Voluntary Confidential Counselling and Testing sites for HIV/AIDS, the community-based interventions for orphans and vulnerable children as well as child protection, the creation of two Regional Committees on the Rights of the Child and the functioning of Water and Environmental Sanitation teams.

9. However, the MTR came up with recommendations to strengthen several weak areas. For example, in terms of cross-cutting strategies, there is an urgent need to (a) introduce results-based management and an Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation Plan, (b) develop a strong communication strategy focusing on behavioural change, and (c) create more meaningful opportunities for the development and participation of children. There is also a need to move from early childhood education towards integrated child development, incorporating a wider circle of stakeholders. In addition, particular attention must be paid to the 'forgotten group' of children 7 to 12 years old, an age bracket encompassing a window of opportunity for the prevention of HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies, school drop-outs and violence. It is also recommended that the Health and Family Life Education programme be expanded to include out-of-school children and adolescents and focus more on a developmental and preventive approach than on remedial action regarding challenges facing youth. Overall, the MTR also recommends that a stronger emphasis be placed on HIV/AIDS within the country programme.

10. Bureau members were pleased to learn that the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security, with technical support from UNICEF, the Economic Commission for Latin

America and the Caribbean and the International Labour Organization, was establishing a Child Protection Monitoring Database, which will track all child protection indicators and serve as a basis for a comprehensive database on the overall situation of children in Guyana. This will be an important contribution to the improvement of social statistics.

11. UNICEF Guyana is a small office. Most of the current staff were recruited in the last two years, either because posts are new or because of the high staff turnover. In the past 12 months, three interim Representatives have led the team, and one new Representative has been appointed. She will take up her post in June.

The United Nations and the Millennium Development Goals

12. The meeting with the United Nations country team was very informative. The country team is finalizing the CCA/UNDAF for the programming cycle 2006-2010 using a human-rights based approach to programming as the framework. The Millennium Development Goals are expected to frame the United Nations Development Assistance in Guyana. Guyana's 2003 "Report on Progress towards the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals", the first such report in the Caribbean, notes several main challenges for the country in its efforts to achieve these Goals: poverty, economic underdevelopment, and vulnerability to economic, environmental and social hazards.

13. During the Bureau members' visit with the President of Guyana, he expressed concern about the Guyana report on the Goals, which he said proposed global targets without adaptation to the local situation. He also indicated that the Goals are taken well into account in the Guyana poverty reduction strategy programme. While the probability of reaching universal primary education and gender parity in education is very high and the status of supporting conditions for reaching them very strong, it is a matter of concern that the goals for reducing child and maternal mortality as well as HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, are not likely to be achieved and that conditions to support these goals are weak.

14. Bureau members are, however, positive about the Government's demonstrated commitment to addressing HIV/AIDS through the newly established Presidential Commission, housed in the Office of the President and chaired by the President of Guyana. The Presidential Commission will monitor the implementation and distribution of the substantial external funds for HIV/AIDS coming to Guyana. The Bureau is pleased that the Government has asked UNICEF to be a member of the Presidential Commission on HIV/AIDS.

15. The United Nations HIV/AIDS theme group is playing an important role as a forum of coordination, concerted efforts and information exchange. Examples of collaborative programmes were described to Bureau members, but the country team does not yet implement a joint programme. The country team acknowledges the need to seize all opportunities in which joint programmes would indeed add value through effectiveness and efficiency, but cautioned against joint programmes when collaborative modalities could be more relevant and appropriate. One potential candidate for joint programming is the strengthening of national capacity in social statistics, since weaknesses in this area have long been identified. Capacity-building in social statistics would not only help in the monitoring of the Goals but would also support government efforts in sound evidence-based policy-making.

Project sites visits

16. The group was divided in two sub-groups for field visits, which focused mainly on education, health, water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS and child protection, all with a strong community-development approach. Project visits, which took place both in the coastal region and in the interior Amerindian regions, included: the Linden Care Foundation (NGO), which established the first care and support project for children and families living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in Guyana; the *Escuela Nueva* project in the Aishalton, Santa Rosa, and Waramuri areas; the Child-Friendly School in Region 6; the VIP latrines in schools and improved household wells in Aishalton; the health hut in Waramuri; Regional Committees on the Rights of the Child; and the St. Francis Community Developers (NGO).

17. The Bureau members were particularly impressed by the positive feelings emanating from the stakeholders, whether be they government officials, NGO representatives, community activists, parents, teachers or children themselves. These people showed pride, dignity and self-esteem. There was also strong evidence of commitment at all levels as well as a sense of ownership, as seen in the enthusiasm - indeed passion - of most community leaders. The quality of the community or school leaders (some of them children as young as eight years old) was impressive not only because of their commitment and expertise but also because of their dedication, understanding of problems, creative and innovative solutions, and facility at learning-by-doing.

18. Equally impressive was the fact that most of the initiatives visited were very much client-centred. The *Escuela Nueva* and the Child-Friendly Schools, for example, placed children at the centre of the approach through means such as learning corners, cooperative group learning, very effective student government bodies, and successful efforts to eliminate fear in the classroom.

19. The St. Francis Community Developers and the Linden Care Foundation also made project clients their primary concern. This is why, for example, the St. Francis Community Developers strived to ensure the confidentiality of HIV/AIDS testing and counselling by locating it in a multi-purpose youth centre with various activities, such as documentation, training, Internet use and a restaurant. This multi-disciplinary approach works towards promoting positive adolescent development. More efforts at protection, however, need to be devoted to developing additional educational, recreational and skills-building opportunities for adolescents, especially young adolescents.

20. The community basis of most of the projects is also noteworthy. A good case in point was the Linden Care Foundation project, whose main purpose is to provide improved care and support for children and families living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Their project not only has provided valuable information on HIV/AIDS to stakeholders and the general public but has also contributed to de-stigmatizing the illness and to changing behaviours. As one of the project leaders put it, "They have turned a stigmatizing and shameful condition into a [positive] driving force for the whole community". In the same vein, the St. Francis Community Developers has turned its centre into a pole of attraction for youth, covering a variety of their needs (for information, counselling, sports, etc.). The project's outreach activities involving community volunteers also addresses the nutritional needs of children and youth. The community basis of the projects is also evident in the very active participation of parents in school activities, which was noted in all schools visited.

21. Another very positive feature of most of the projects observed was that, through UNICEF's initial technical and financial support, NGOs were able to attract additional resources from various funding agencies, thus developing broad-based partnerships. The contribution of all partners was clearly acknowledged by beneficiaries in all project sites. For example, the Care and Support Project of the Linden Care Foundation is now also supported by the United States Agency for International Development; the *Escuela Nueva* was introduced in Guyana through UNICEF with funding from the United Kingdom Department for International Development; and the St. Francis Community Developers has been successful in acquiring additional funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, the British High Commission and other organizations.

22. While most of the projects are new, others are successful because they have been implemented for a long time and have given the communities time to learn by doing and to consolidate the processes and results of the projects. The positive outcome of this longer-term approach serves as an important reminder, especially in the face of pressure to produce immediate results, that social transformation does not happen overnight and takes time and perseverance. This is especially true in countries like Guyana, where adequate human resources for implementation and continued capacity-building remain issues.

23. Bureau members were very appreciative of the formation of the two Regional Committees for the Rights of the Child in Regions 6 and 10. These Committees, which comprise government officials and non-governmental agencies and advocate for child rights in the respective regions, provide many lessons learned in decentralizing the realization of the Millennium Development Goals and *A World Fit for Children*. In addition, it was noted that both Regional Democratic Councils show genuine commitment to the creation of a protective environment for children to ensure, at the local level, the survival and development of children.

24. The Bureau members also appreciated the fact that stakeholders presented not only the achievements of efforts but also the challenges, shortcomings and areas for improvement. The latter include, for example, the limits of volunteerism and the weaknesses of some of the student government bodies. Such a lucid assessment is the first step for finding solutions.

25. In conclusion, the visit by Bureau members of the UNICEF Executive Board provided a good basis for observing the work of UNICEF on the ground. On the strength of what they were able to see and to hear, the Bureau members conclude that most of the projects visited have the ingredients for being not only successful but also sustainable: commitment at all levels, leadership, dignity, pride, motivation, enthusiasm and passion of the participants, partnerships, capacity-building and empowerment.

26. The Bureau members wish to thank the national authorities at all levels, the civil society organizations, and the children and women of Guyana for being so generous with their time and their hospitality. The members also thank Jean Gough and Christine Norton for taking part in and providing technical support to the mission to Guyana. A special note of appreciation goes to the UNICEF team in Guyana, supported by Carlos Mazuera, for preparing this visit at such a short notice as well as for their professionalism, dedication and friendliness. Last but not least, the Bureau wishes to thank Canada for funding this trip.

Recommendations for future Bureau visits

(a) The Board should institutionalize these very useful Bureau visits as elements of working methods and include them in the annual work plan of the Board.

(b) In order to maximize the potential usefulness of these visits, future Bureau visits should take place earlier in the year, preferably in March, at the same time as the other Executive Board visits.

(c) Funding of these visits should be secured through the normal budgeting process in the secretariat, rather than relying on the goodwill of donor countries.

(d) The principle of geographical rotation should be applied to Bureau visits.
