

UNICEF's role in emergencies

UNICEF works in collaboration with local and international partners, including governments, UN agencies, and civil society. These partnerships are crucial to ensuring comprehensive and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance. They also permit the diverse array of programmes necessary to address the full spectrum of children's rights, a fact that is especially important in emergencies, when these rights are most under threat.

During emergencies, children are especially vulnerable to disease, malnutrition and violence. In the last decade, more than 2 million children have died as a direct result of armed conflict, and more than three times that number have been permanently disabled or seriously injured. An estimated 20 million children have been forced to flee their homes, and more than 1 million have been orphaned or separated from their families. An estimated 300,000 child soldiers – boys and girls under the age of 18 – are involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. UNICEF focuses on these children and their families – on the essential interventions required for protection, to save lives and to ensure the rights of all children, everywhere. The chaos and insecurity of war threatens or destroys access to food,

shelter, social support and health care, and results in increased vulnerability in communities, especially for children.

Measles, diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, malaria and malnutrition are the major killers of children during humanitarian crises. Therefore, emergency immunization is one of UNICEF's priority interventions, along with vitamin A supplementation and therapeutic feeding centres. UNICEF also works to ensure safe supplies of drinking water, and to improve sanitary conditions for communities and the displaced.

When children are uprooted by armed conflict or natural disaster, they are cut off from social support, family and schools. The loss of education robs young people of the stability and security so vital to their healthy development. Rehabilitating schools helps rebuild a protective environment for children by establishing normal routines within communities threatened by violence and war, providing a place for children to learn, play and simply be children. Schools offer a place for adolescents to develop their potential, for example by participating in peace-building efforts, which can help build their self-esteem while supporting community reconciliation. UNICEF-sponsored Back-to-School programmes thus help heal

the wounds of war and disaster, while providing young people with the vital tools they need to succeed later in life.

Sexual and gender-based violence are a disturbingly common feature of emergencies. In situations of armed conflict, girls and women are routinely targeted in campaigns of sexual violence, including rape, mutilation, prostitution, forced pregnancy and sexual slavery. UNICEF works to protect children and women from gender-based violence, focusing its efforts in three areas: prevention; protection; and recovery and reintegration. Many humanitarian crises cause the forced displacement of families, with children separated from their caregivers and at grave risk of violence, abuse, abduction and exploitation.

A key part of UNICEF's work in humanitarian crises therefore focuses on child protection, including tracing and reunification programmes for separated children. UNICEF also works to prevent the recruitment of children into armed groups, and to ensure that those who have been recruited benefit from demobilization programmes.

Landmines and unexploded ordnance often impede post-conflict development and reconstruction, blocking access to much-needed resources and posing significant risks to refugee and internally

displaced children fleeing from conflict or returning home. Mine risk education activities remain the most effective short-term solution to keeping children and women safe from these terrible weapons.

Emergency conditions, including sexual violence and exploitation, displacement and the presence of armed groups, increase the risk of transmission of HIV/AIDS. UNICEF promotes access to information and basic care for HIV/AIDS to affected communities, including education messages for young people and post-rape and psychosocial health training for community health-care workers.

In 2005, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agreed to implement a 'cluster approach' to improve the predictability and quality of humanitarian response in non-refugee settings. UNICEF has agreed globally to lead the clusters for nutrition, water and sanitation, common data services, and education, while continuing strong field work in health and child protection. We may also be called on to lead other sectors at country level given our strong field presence. UNICEF has worked very closely with partners to develop specific cluster reports and we will now jointly develop a work plan to implement the approach starting with new emergencies in 2006. Combined with our Core Commitments for Children in Emergencies (CCCs), the cluster lead arrangement

implies significant strengthening of our coordination and field capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance more effectively.

In all our work, but particularly in emergencies, UNICEF recognizes that all children everywhere have the same rights. Our task is to ensure that those who have a duty to protect and ensure those rights provide all the support required.