

Children without Parental Care

Millions of children around the world are growing up without one or both of their parents. Many more are at risk of separation, due to the impact of poverty, disability and HIV/AIDS or such crises as natural disaster and armed conflict. Children without parental care find themselves at a higher risk of discrimination, inadequate care, abuse and exploitation, and their well-being is often insufficiently monitored. Many children are placed unnecessarily and for too long in institutions, where they receive less of the stimulation and individual attention needed to grow to their full potential. Inadequate care environments can impair children's emotional and social development and leave them vulnerable to exploitation, sexual abuse and physical violence.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- About 1.5 million children in the CEE/CIS live in public care.¹ In Europe and Central Asia, over one million children live in residential institutions.²
- In 93 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the number of orphans (children aged 0–17 who have lost one or both parents) was estimated to be 143 million at the end of 2003; of those children 15 million were orphaned by AIDS, more than 12 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa.³
- Asia has the highest number of orphans due to all causes, with 87.6 million children (2003).⁴

BUILDING A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

Government commitment and capacity

Extended child welfare services and poverty-reduction initiatives are needed to help prevent separation. Government support – through appropriate policies, funding and legislation – is vital for establishing and promoting family-based alternatives to institutional care. For children who remain in public care, regulation and monitoring of

HUMAN RIGHTS

While children have the right to be cared for by their parents or family, a child who no longer has a family, has become separated from his or her family, or whose family presents serious danger to his or her health or development has the right to alternative care. Four possible types of alternative care are mentioned in Article 20 of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**: foster placement, *kafalah* of Islamic law, adoption or, if other options are not available, placement in a suitable institution.

institutions, in line with agreed national and international standards and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are essential.

Legislation and enforcement

Laws must protect children from unnecessary separation from their families. Children without parental care need to be protected from discrimination, violence and abuse and should have full access to education and health care. Inheritance laws must not discriminate against girls or against any children who have lost a parent to HIV/AIDS.

Attitudes, customs and practices

Discrimination based on gender, disability, ethnicity or HIV status, which contributes to children being institutionalized, must end. Positive attitudes to domestic adoption and well-monitored foster care can ensure that children who cannot be cared for by their families still grow up in a family environment.

Open discussion

The media can help dispel myths about the benefits of institutional care and educate the public about domestic adoption, foster care and respect for a child's right to grow up in a family environment.

Children's life skills, knowledge and participation

These are crucial, particularly when parental care is not available. Children should be provided with

opportunities to express their views and wishes with regard to their care arrangements. They need to be aware of their rights and helped to protect themselves from exploitation, abuse and the dangers of trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

Capacity of families and communities

Community-based social services, such as day care, parenting education and home support for children with disabilities, are needed to strengthen the capacity of families to care for their children and of extended families and communities to provide alternative forms of care.

Monitoring, reporting and oversight

Mechanisms are needed to ensure oversight of institutions providing public and private care, as well as foster care arrangements. Data collection and analysis on the situation of children without parental care is key to changing public attitudes, promoting better practices and increasing accountability.

EXAMPLES OF UNICEF IN ACTION

UNICEF is contributing to the development of a continuum of social services to gradually replace the system of residential care institutions in all countries of the **CEE/CIS**. Its strategies to this effect include upgrading or piloting essential elements in the continuum of services such as child and family support services, social work functions and foster care systems; developing standards for

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

When parents are struggling to overcome poverty, AIDS or natural disaster, families may be compelled to place their children in public care institutions, where their access to quality education is likely to be poor (thus thwarting the aim of MDG 2, universal primary education). Children separated from their mother at an early age, especially if they remain in institutional settings for a long time, may suffer from damaged emotional and physical development and are at greater risk of early death – diminishing reductions in child mortality (MDG 4).

service providers; upgrading competencies and accountabilities for professionals working with children; reforming the legal base for child care systems; establishing independent monitoring bodies; and transforming residential care institutions into alternative care services.

In **Malawi**, UNICEF's advocacy efforts have helped secure high-level political commitment and re-resources for the scale-up of the response to the crisis of orphans and other vulnerable children. In 2005, the National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children was launched by the President on the Day of the African Child, 16 June. Also, UNICEF focused on enhancing the capacity of families and communities to care for their orphans and vulnerable children through supporting 611 community-based child care centres reaching out to nearly 50,000 children under the age of 5.

In the aftermath of the **Pakistan** earthquake in October 2005, UNICEF and its partners rushed to provide psychosocial assistance to orphans, unaccompanied children and children who lost their family members during the earthquake. To protect these children from trafficking and exploitation UNICEF has taken the lead responsibility to register all children in the relief camps.

Notes

¹ United Nations Children's Fund, *TransMonee 2005: Data, Indicators and Features on the Situation of Children in CEE/CIS and Baltic States*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, 2005, p. 5.

² United Nations Children's Fund, *Stop Violence against Children: Act Now, Report of the Regional Consultation for the UN Study on Violence against Children, 5-7 July 2005, Ljubljana, Slovenia*, UNICEF, 2005, p. 9.

³ Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, United Nations Children's Fund and United States Agency for International Development, *Children on the Brink 2004: A Joint Report of New Orphan Estimates and a Framework for Action*, Population, Health and Nutrition Information Project under USAID, Washington, D.C., July 2004, pp. 7-8.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

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