

# The human rights-based approach to cooperation for children and women

Since 1988, UNICEF has been a leading architect and proponent of the human rights-based approach to programming to fulfil the rights of women and children under the Convention and CEDAW. The organization's country programmes are guided by human rights principles applied in all phases and sectors.

The human rights-based approach is derived from principles that underlie both conventions: accountability, universality and non-discrimination, indivisibility and participation. It is firmly embedded in the work of the United Nations, which in 2003 passed a statement of 'Common Understanding of a Human Rights-Based Approach to Development Cooperation'. Under this paradigm, an underlying aim of all UN programmes is to advance the realization of human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other major human rights instruments.

## Principles of the human rights-based approach

**Universality:** Human rights are innate to all people, irrespective of their ethnic origin, beliefs and practices, geographic location, gender or income level.

Yet despite robust international and national legal frameworks in support of human rights, the social groups that have traditionally suffered from marginalization and discrimination within their countries and societies are still consistently the most at risk of having their rights violated or unfulfilled. A human rights-based approach specifically targets the most marginalized groups – and the most vulnerable members of these groups, which are often women and children – in the countries and communities with the greatest need.

The approach has implications for programme budgets and planning, as it is often more costly to reach marginalized

groups or people living in remote rural locations or urban slums than in more mainstream areas. Immunization provides an example, where unit cost of vaccinating infants in rural areas is far higher than for their counterparts living in cities. Under a human rights-based approach to immunization, an alternative measure for determining programme priorities and allocating resources may be employed. Using the number of deaths prevented (or the healthy years gained) per immunization in place of unit costs as a determining factor in resource allocation immediately changes the cost-benefit equation, since poorer or more marginalized groups are likely to benefit most from the extension of essential services.

Innovative solutions are often required to fulfill the rights of marginalized and disadvantaged children and families. For example, the Government of India and UNICEF have partnered in an outreach initiative that has brought more than 300,000 disadvantaged children to school, using techniques such as mobile learning centres to allow hard-to-reach children access to education.

**Accountability:** Under a human rights-based approach, children and women are recognized as holders of rights rather than objects of charity. States parties, the signatories of the two conventions, have a duty to work towards the realization of human rights for all its citizens. The most vulnerable, notably children and women, are afforded special protection under human rights treaties and frameworks. Empowered citizens and the treaty bodies can hold governments to account for violations of human rights, and assess their progress towards implementing human rights accords. In practical terms, the human rights-based approach involves assisting all levels of the community

and society to meet their obligations to children and women. In Colombia, for example, UNICEF has supported a series of policy and accountability fora in which local elected officials were questioned about their achievements and challenges in the implementation of children's rights.

**Indivisibility:** All human rights are indivisible and interdependent, which implies that no single right should be prioritized over another. For children, indivisibility means ensuring that the rights of the 'whole child' are met through addressing their physical, psychological, developmental and spiritual needs, and not just concentrating on the provision of essential services such as basic health care and education. It also necessitates working in partnership with other organizations with complementary skills and expertise to meet these needs. The human rights-based approach has led to greater emphasis on such broad-based concepts as early childhood development, the continuum of care for maternal, newborn and child health and a protective environment for children. It has also widened the range of core commitments to children in emergencies, including education, child protection and psychosocial therapy and counseling for those affected by natural disasters, pandemics, or armed conflict. In Viet Nam, for instance, the steady application of a human rights-based approach to development cooperation has resulted in officials developing integrated and holistic inter-sectoral policies for health, education and protection.

**Participation:** Central to the human rights-based approach is the premise that development cooperation is more effective when the intended end users –

both individuals and communities – participate in their planning, implementation and evaluation. Individual and community empowerment is both an object of, and a means to, the realization of human rights. Adapting programmes to the local context has been shown to be critical to their acceptance, expansion and sustainability.

For example, in Rwanda, the Government and UNICEF have supported national and local institutions in undertaking grass-roots consultations with children on the national Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy. This process led to children's recommendations making their way into the final document.

### Addressing disparities in child rights

The human rights-based approach to cooperation provides a holistic and integrated framework for addressing disparities in the realization of child rights. In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that the deprivations of children's rights to survival, development and certain types of protection (e.g. child labour) are largely concentrated in certain continents, regions and countries. Within nations, there are also marked disparities among children in the realization of their rights on the basis of household income, geographic location, ethnicity, gender and disability. Increasing access and providing essential services to marginalized and excluded population is critical to fulfil children's rights to survival and development.

The rights-based approach addresses disparities through identifies the most vulnerable and excluded areas and groups within countries, through with utilising of the direct, underlying causes

and basic causes of the disparities they face in survival, development and protection. This approach also helps articulate the claims of the poor and marginalized through advocacy and social mobilization. It demands accountability on the part of duty bearers to fulfil the rights of women and children, and ensures that their claims are codified in national and local legislation and policies and supported by adequate budgets. It also seeks to leverage resources – financial, human, information or material – in support of policies to reduce disparities to the maximum extent possible given a country's level of development.

The Good Start in Life Program in Peru is an example of a human rights-based programme addressing the direct causes of disparities – in this case inadequate access to quality health care and information on improved nutritional and hygiene practices that contribute to high rates of stunting and micronutrient deficiency among children under three from the poorest indigenous populations in the Andean highlands and the Amazon forest of that country. The application of a cost-effective package of interventions including growth monitoring, nutritional and health care guidance to mothers, micronutrient supplementation and hygiene promotion, together with strong community involvement, helped reduce rates of stunting from 54 per cent in 2000 to 37 per cent in 2004, and decrease vitamin A deficiency from 30 per cent to around 5 per cent over the same period.

Programmes and policies also aim to address the underlying and basic causes undermining rights fulfilment. For instance, disparities in income can be addressed through poverty reduction strategies, including social

protection measures such as cash transfers to poor households to support spending on social goods such as health care and education for children. Such programmes are commonly found in Latin America, with the most well-known examples being Brazil's Bolsa Escola initiative and Mexico's Oportunidades programme. But other regions are also making strides in providing income support programmes: for example, Malawi has introduced a cash transfer scheme in six districts to provide support to orphans and vulnerable children and child-headed households in particular.

Gender inequality can be addressed by increasing awareness of discriminatory practices and promoting legal and social reforms. Disparities in the provision of essential services due to geographical location can be reduced by applying integrated services and mobile services. For example, in southern Sudan, child immunization programmes have been successfully combined with cattle vaccination against rinderpest. Expanding educational opportunities to mothers is pivotal to improving children's survival and development, as research has shown that educated women are less likely to die in childbirth and are more likely to send their children to school.

A key challenge ahead is to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of human rights-based programmes, not only in producing better outcomes for child survival, development, protection and participation but also in transforming attitudes, practices, policies, laws and programmes that support the fulfilment of children's rights.

*See References, pages 90–92.*