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Thematic discussion on results and lessons learned in the medium-term strategic plan focus area 4
Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse

Summary

The 2011 annual session of the UNICEF Executive Board provides a strategic opportunity to reflect on the progress of the child protection sector and the results achieved for children in collaboration with partners. This paper provides an overview of progress and challenges over the past five years, and concludes with an indication of future directions for UNICEF engagement in the medium-term strategic plan focus area 4: child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse.

I. Evolution of the child protection sector

1. To place the results that have been achieved over the past five years in context, it is helpful to consider how the child protection sector has evolved since its early inception, some 25 years ago. The 1980s have been characterized as a key decade of the ‘Child Survival and Development Revolution’, but this period is also notable for a growing concern for children’s protection, with a focus on marginalized girls and boys, including those affected by conflict. The term ‘children in especially difficult circumstances’ – used during the late 1980s and 1990s – drew on programme experiences with children living and working on the streets of Latin America and elsewhere. It soon expanded to include children in armed conflict and child victims of abuse and neglect, as outlined in the UNICEF policy for children in especially difficult circumstances (1986).1

1 See Executive Board decision 1986/12 and E/ICEF/1986/L.3.
2. Galvanized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)\(^2\) and lessons learned in the field over the past two decades, there has been a historic shift from issue-based, small-scale and more palliative projects towards a holistic approach and a focus on prevention and on building a protective environment.\(^3\) Consequently, the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy (2008) emphasizes:

   (a) Strengthening child protection systems (laws, policies, regulations and services across all sectors, especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice) to address protection gaps and risks, ensure coherent referral systems, and promote early intervention. This includes family support mechanisms to lower the risk of separation, violence, and exploitation, and ensuring other prevention and response efforts;

   (b) Addressing the social norms that underlie many forms of violence, exploitation and abuse, and harnessing social norms that reinforce child protection;

   (c) Ensuring that interventions to protect children in emergencies (conflict and natural disasters) strengthen protection systems and address underlying social norms to bridge humanitarian and development efforts and achieve sustainable results for children;

   (d) Strengthening the evidence base on child protection, ensuring that evidence is used effectively to improve policies, laws and their implementation; and

   (e) Convening and catalysing agents of change around child protection and leveraging the full potential of partnerships.\(^4\)

II. Strategic context

Equity and Child Protection

3. The UNICEF Mission Statement clearly commits the organization “to ensuring special protection for the most disadvantaged children – victims of war, disasters, extreme poverty, all forms of violence and exploitation and those with disabilities. UNICEF responds in emergencies to protect the rights of children.” Further, the sector’s evolution demonstrates that equity is at the core of child protection. The cohorts that child protection interventions address are the most marginalized children – those who are hardest to reach. While poverty is a predictor of vulnerability to some child protection violations, there are many other factors at play linked to discrimination and deeply entrenched social norms, attitudes and behaviours.\(^5\) A ‘poverty plus’ approach is essential to address the many kinds of protection violations that children experience. Strengthening child protection systems and addressing underlying social norms are key strategies for reaching the most marginalized.

4. The United Nations Millennium Declaration, in Section VI on ‘Protecting the vulnerable’, clearly notes the protection of children and civilian populations in natural disasters, armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies, as well as the full implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the optional protocols, as major global commitments. While there are no specific Millennium Development Goals for child protection, protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation is necessary for achieving each of the Goals with

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\(^2\) Almost half of the 54 articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child directly pertain to protection issues.

\(^3\) See the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy (E/ICEF/2008/5/Rev.1).

\(^4\) See the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy for more details on these approaches and types of interventions.

equity. For example, child labour prevents, delays and curtails access to education (Goal 2). Girls are more likely to be pulled out of school to do domestic work (Goal 2); and girls who survive sexual violence are more likely to have their physical and mental health, including their maternal health, compromised (Goals 5 and 6). Child marriage frequently leads to early withdrawal of girls from school and impedes gender equality (Goals 2 and 3); it curtails personal freedoms and often leads to early pregnancy, which carries health risks for girls (Goal 5) and their babies (Goal 4). Without addressing protection, investments in health, education, HIV/AIDS and other areas may not bring lasting improvements in the lives of children.

5. This is also why it is important to ensure that child well-being is sustained across childhood. Interventions at one phase of a child’s life will have cumulative benefits in the following stages, and will help prevent children from falling through the cracks. They will also contribute to benefits across successive generations.

Complex programming landscape

6. Similar to other aspects of child well-being, child protection is affected by the complex programming landscape that has emerged in recent years. The impact of the financial crisis, urbanization and climate change on protective social networks and services has increased children’s vulnerability to violence, abuse and exploitation, highlighting the importance of strong child protection systems. In addition, the changing nature of emergencies, including increasingly severe natural disasters and the role of armed groups and non-State actors in conflict, has created new protection challenges.

7. In 2005, the United Nations Security Council established, through Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), a comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict. Security Council resolutions 1882 and 1888 (2009), and 1960 (2010), expanded the MRM to include new violations of killing, maiming and sexual violence. This has strengthened the international normative framework and lent momentum to efforts to end these gross violations of children’s rights. Some of these resolutions assign special roles to UNICEF, broadening the organization’s engagement in this complex area of work. Operationally, the schemes established under these resolutions provide opportunities to advance information gathering for enhanced situation analysis, improve coordination among stakeholders and implement more effective advocacy and programmatic activities for children and women.

Greater collaboration and consensus on child protection

8. The past five years have been marked by a growing commitment to the main approaches outlined in the Child Protection Strategy (2008).

9. The appointment of three special representatives of the Secretary-General on various dimensions of violence (children and armed conflict; violence against children; and, most recently, sexual violence in conflict) is unprecedented and provides a platform for highly effective independent advocacy around which action can be leveraged for prevention and response.

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10. Recent years have also seen an expansion of actors in the private sector who have an interest in promoting child protection, including in their specific areas of work. The Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography is the first international standard that stresses the importance of government collaboration with the private sector, broadening its engagement not only in terms of corporate social responsibility but also in realization of international standards for children.

11. Increasing collective interest in child protection research, monitoring and evaluation through partnerships with other development agencies, government bodies, foundations, United Nations agencies and academics has spurred advances in data collection on child protection, which will be discussed later in this paper.

III. Situation of children

12. Children across all wealth quintiles, in development and emergency contexts, and in low-income, middle-income and industrialized countries are vulnerable to various forms of violence, abuse and exploitation in a range of settings: in school, in home and in the community. Robust data on child protection is growing, providing a more comprehensive picture of the situation of children, and the characteristics of those most at risk:

(a) In 2007, the births of around 51 million children were not registered, often putting them beyond the reach of protection and basic services to which they have a right, such as health care, social welfare and education. Across some regions, children from the wealthiest households are 2-3 times as likely to have their births registered as those from the poorest;

(b) A relationship also exists between wealth quintile and child marriage: across many developing countries, girls from the poorest households are 3 times more likely to be married before the age of 18, as compared to those from the richest. While the median age at first marriage has increased among the wealthiest women, it remains about the same among the poorest;

(c) Some forms of violence cut across all wealth quintiles. Across all regions, many children experience physical punishment regardless of their economic status. Female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C) rates vary more by ethnicity than by any other socio-demographic variable. Across 27 countries in Africa and one country in the Middle East, more than 70 million girls and women (aged 15-49 years) have undergone female FGM/C.

13. Though precise data is difficult to collect for some protection issues, the estimates raise concern:

(a) Between 500 million and 1.5 billion children experience violence annually, often by those they should be able to trust;

(b) In 2002, 150 million girls and 73 million boys experienced forced sexual intercourse;

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7 See Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity (2010) and Progress for Children: A Report Card on Child Protection (2009). Unless otherwise noted, the data listed in this section are from these two reports.
8 MICS and DHS (2003-2006). Data available for 16 of the 29 countries where FGM/C is widely practiced. Prevalence refers to the percentage of girls and women aged 15-49 years old who have been cut. See UNICEF (2009), Progress for Children: A Report Card on Child Protection, p.13
10 Ibid.
Approximately 150 million children under age 14 worldwide are engaged in child labour. Whereas boys are more likely to be engaged in economic activity, girls are disproportionately engaged in household chores;

Some 2 million children globally are living in institutions;\(^{11}\)

Children are recruited by armed groups or forces in at least 13 countries, and worldwide, millions of children have experienced conflict through the loss of parents or sudden, forced dislocation.

**IV. Key result areas in child protection**

14. The in-depth review of the medium-term strategic plan in 2010 confirmed the relevance of the results structure adopted following the midterm review in 2008.\(^{12}\) It emphasized strengthening multisectoral approaches and partnerships and greater attention to monitoring, evaluation and research to inform policies and programmes, in line with the approved Child Protection Strategy.\(^{13}\)

**Key result area 1: Strengthening child protection systems**\(^{14}\)

15. The shift from addressing issues or specific groups of children in isolation towards a holistic and more sustainable systems approach is gaining significant ground. UNICEF brokered an inter-agency consensus on the key components of child protection systems: laws, policies and standards; services and service delivery mechanisms; human resources; coordination and collaboration on child protection; communication and advocacy; and data and evidence to inform interventions. This framework provided the basis for improved collaboration between UNICEF and partners on system strengthening. In 2010, 125 countries engaged in strengthening social welfare and justice systems and 98 countries reported mapping child protection systems, which is informing interventions.\(^{15}\)

16. Laws, policies, standards, and services continued to align with global and international frameworks. UNICEF supported efforts to bring national policies and services in line with Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009), resulting in the development of standards and technical recommendations to improve care. The number of countries with national policies on the provision of alternative care for children in line with international standards increased from 36 (in 2005) to 58 (in 2010).\(^{16}\)

17. Services to improve birth registration have also been strengthened, with approximately 62 UNICEF offices currently supporting national efforts in this area. A particularly successful approach has been the integration of birth registration into health services. Examples include coupling birth registration with communication campaigns, linking the birth registration system to midwifery service networks, and integrating a birth registration component into hospitals and

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\(^{11}\) This global figure is likely to be severely underestimated due to underreporting and lack of reliable data.

\(^{12}\) For the sake of brevity, the titles of the key results areas have been abridged in this paper. For their full titles, see Executive Board document E/ICEF/2010/10.


\(^{14}\) For brevity, the titles of the key result areas in this paper have been abridged. Please see the Executive Board document E/ICEF/2010/10 for full titles. http://www.unicef.org/about/execboard/files/E-ICEF-2010-10-Updated_annexes_of_MTSP-E.pdf

\(^{15}\) From a review of country office annual reports (2010).

\(^{16}\) Responses by country offices to UNICEF standard monitoring questions for the MTSP (2005-2010).
health facilities. Technical innovations have enhanced institutional capacities to deliver birth registration services for children, and mobile registration has been especially successful in reaching isolated areas.

18. In accordance with the United Nations Secretary-General’s Guidance Note on the United Nations Common Approach to Justice for Children (2008), there has been an important shift from juvenile justice to justice for children – going beyond children in conflict with the law to include child victims and witnesses of crime. With governments and other partners, UNICEF has supported a comprehensive approach that includes law development, standard setting, capacity-building and service delivery, and the reduction of deprivation of liberty through alternative measures. The shift to justice for children is illustrated by 21 additional governments having taken measures to implement the United Nations Guidelines on Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime since 2005, bringing the total to 43 in 2010.

19. Across regions, UNICEF supported advocacy and awareness-raising on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force in May 2008. A child-friendly version of the Convention (It's About Ability) was developed and used for public education at the country level. Beyond advocacy, UNICEF provided technical assistance to review national legislation in light of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and supported efforts to ensure that disability is taken into account in child protection as well as in other sectors, including by contributing to guidance in this area.

Key result area 2: Promoting changes in social norms

20. In parallel with system-strengthening efforts, progress has been made in changing social norms, leading to more cohesive partnerships and expanded work at country level. Since 2008, the United Nations Population Fund-UNICEF Joint Programme for the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting has expanded from 12 countries to 15. The programmatic approach involves collective discussion at the community level and public declarations of abandonment, underpinned by an enabling environment, including relevant legislation, policies, services and involvement of the media, government and opinion leaders. Lessons learned to date are being more systematically applied to change the norms around child marriage. In collaboration with the education sector, various forms of violence in schools were addressed through changing attitudes and practices, supporting teachers to use non-violent discipline, and working with children to address bullying.

21. Globally, the impact of social norms on child protection has been taken into account in key documents and advocacy platforms, for example, the Secretary-General reports on the girl child and General Assembly resolutions on the girl child. The Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women are developing their first joint comment, focusing on harmful traditional practices.

22. Along with many partners, UNICEF contributed to the United Nations Global Study on Violence against Children (2006) and has continued to support follow-up on its recommendations. This effort includes leveraging the advocacy efforts of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on violence against children. This has resulted

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17 This only includes countries that received funds under the programme.
18 For example, A/64/315 of 21 August 2009.
19 For example, A/C.3/64/L.20/Rev. of 20 November 2009.
in progress towards comprehensive national strategies to address violence against children and strengthened national data collection efforts.


24. UNICEF has also helped to advance the global dialogue on the causes and effects of armed violence by bringing the perspective of children to several key policy and political documents. With partners, UNICEF contributed to the development of International Small Arms Control Standards, sponsoring two of its key modules that relate to children and youth.  

25. Effective protection of children from violence, exploitation and abuse depends on the efforts of diverse actors, including national governments, regional bodies, civil society organizations, faith-based communities, international financial institutions and United Nations agencies. In recent years, there has been an expansion in strategic partnerships, including with the private sector. For example, Together for Girls (established in 2009) is an innovative partnership involving the private sector, three other United Nations agencies, the United States Government and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to support national governments and civil society in addressing violence (with a focus on sexual violence). It aims to implement evidence-based interventions that reinforce system-strengthening and change of social norms. Another important partnership is the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism. The Code has a global reach, having expanded from 276 companies in 28 countries in 2006 to 1,024 companies in over 41 countries in 2010. Partnerships with the private sector have also been strengthened on child labour and corporate social responsibility, resulting in the revision of corporate codes of conduct.

Key result area 3: Child protection in armed conflict and humanitarian crises

26. For many children across the world, emergencies – in the form of conflict and natural disaster – create new protection risks and exacerbate children’s vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and abuse. Experiences to date show the importance of emergency preparedness and response for enhanced protection of children. Illustrating the increased attention to this area, the number of countries that have incorporated child protection in emergency preparedness and response into national planning mechanisms increased from 46 in 2008 to 55 in 2010.

27. UNICEF plays an important role in humanitarian coordination of child protection, gender-based violence, and mental health and psychosocial support. In 2010, UNICEF led or co-led coordination of child protection in emergencies in 30 countries, gender-based violence in 6 countries and supported implementation of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Guidelines in 30 countries.

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20 Module 06.20 – Children, Youth and Small Arms and Light Weapons; and Module 04.20 – Designing and implementing community safety programming.

21 Standard monitoring questions in UNICEF country office annual reports, 2008-2010.

22 The UNICEF coordination role in these areas was established under the humanitarian reform process in 2005, led by the Inter-agency Standing Committee.
28. There has been a strengthened application of a systems approach in emergencies to bridge emergency and development work. In a number of countries, emergencies provided an opportunity and entry-point to strengthen the child protection system, including legal reform and social welfare systems. In parallel with system strengthening work, UNICEF continued to address urgent protection issues in emergencies, in line with the UNICEF Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. For example, 36,495 children formerly associated with armed groups and forces were reintegrated into their communities between 2008 and 2010. Large-scale natural disasters challenged the organization to rapidly scale up prevention and response efforts. For example, in Haiti, in addition to coordinating over 120 child protection actors and over 100 organizations on mental health and psychosocial support to address key gaps, UNICEF-supported efforts reached nearly 120,000 children through child friendly spaces. The response to the earthquake in Haiti was an opportunity for UNICEF to work with government partners to strengthen the child-protection system through legal reform, regulation and capacity building, in line with lessons learned on systems-strengthening work in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.23

29. With regard to the normative framework to protect children from armed conflict, the number of States Parties to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict increased from 110 (in 2006) to 140 (in 2011). Support of the Special Representative on children and armed conflict has been instrumental in these and related advocacy efforts.

Key result area 4: Monitoring, research, evaluation and use of data

30. The renewed equity focus of UNICEF requires even more robust evidence on the situation of the most vulnerable children –both girls and boys. Data collection and analysis to broaden the evidence base on child protection and inform programme and policy interventions occurred in all regions. The number of UNICEF-assisted country programmes undertaking a gender analysis of key child protection issues within the current programme cycle increased from 26 in 2005 to 53 in 2010.24

31. Though challenged by a weaker evidence base, as compared to other sectors, due to the hidden and sensitive nature of violations, significant progress has been achieved. Continued support to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other household-based surveys have expanded the evidence base on child protection and resulted in a number of key data-driven publications. For example, Progress for Children: a Report Card on Child Protection (September 2009) provides the first comprehensive resource on child protection statistics. Child Disciplinary Practices at Home: Evidence from a Range of Low- and Middle-Income Countries (2011) is the first publication of this type to provide comparable, cross-national data in this area.

32. Significant advancements have been made on new data collection tools, methodologies and information management systems. Global indicators on juvenile justice, formal care, rule of law, and armed violence were developed with partners.25 With respect to armed conflict –

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24 This figure is from the compilation of responses to standard monitoring questions in country office annual reports (2005-2010).
which presents even more challenges to data collection – UNICEF has developed ‘macro-monitoring’ methodologies on grave violations against children, in collaboration with Columbia University and the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At the country level, data collection and information management systems have been strengthened, including through the Child Protection Information Management System, which seeks enhanced case management in emergency and development settings.

33. In order to improve coordination and the quality of monitoring and evaluation initiatives among partners and thematic areas, and to provide technical guidance on the development of data collection tools and methodologies, an interagency Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group was established in 2010. Technical work is under way to develop methodological and ethical guidelines on data collection on violence against children and on children out of home care.\(^{26}\)

34. The MRM on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict is currently active in 13 countries. A high-level consultation in 2010 with key partners on the niche and role of UNICEF in accordance with these resolutions resulted in a comprehensive programme of action. UNICEF is working closely with United Nations partners to standardize and strengthen MRM implementation.

V. Lessons learned and future directions

35. Experience to date supports the continued focus of UNICEF on strengthening child protection systems and addressing social norms in all contexts, including in conflicts and natural disasters.

36. Since approval of the Child Protection Strategy, system strengthening efforts have yielded important lessons that will inform future work. First, the understanding of a ‘child protection system’ has expanded to include not only government but also non-state actors, children, families, and communities; the linkages between these diverse actors need to be better defined. The ways in which child protection systems function vary significantly by country context. The subsystems related to birth registration, alternative care and juvenile justice are often well developed but need to be better integrated into the overall child protection system. The protective role of allied systems, including health and education, needs to be further strengthened, including addressing the needs of children without family care. Finally, strong child protection systems are an important element of emergency preparedness and response.

37. Moving forward, system strengthening efforts in child protection and other sectors will be further reviewed and analysed to develop the approach and to identify the most effective methods to strengthen child protection systems in various contexts, including in emergencies. This will also inform more refined strategies to reach the most marginalized children and address vulnerabilities related to urbanization, migration and financial crises.

38. Building on lessons learned with other sectors, particularly with HIV/AIDS, current and potential synergies between child protection and social protection will be further identified and harnessed to more holistically protect children who are vulnerable and marginalized for a variety of reasons. Additional efforts will determine the impact of social protection on child protection outcomes, including for marginalized groups, and the mix of interventions most effective to address vulnerability across contexts.

\(^{26}\) Further information on the Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group can be found at www.cpmerg.org.
39. Changing social norms is also an extremely complex and time-intensive area of work. While significant progress has been made in understanding the dynamics of social norms, particularly in relation to harmful practices, this is still an area that requires the additional acquisition and application of knowledge, grounded in field experience. Lessons learned to date on abandonment of FGM/C will be more systematically applied to address child marriage.

40. Work in emergencies presents important opportunities for child protection on which UNICEF will further build. The growing number of Security Council resolutions on children affected by armed conflict are contributing to policy dialogue and informing programme strategies to prevent and respond to child protection violations. Experiences have also demonstrated that emergencies – both natural disaster and conflict – are an important entry point to strengthen child-protection systems and address social norms.

41. Recent large-scale emergencies have greatly challenged UNICEF and partners, highlighting the urgent need to have staff in place that can be quickly mobilized to respond. Together with standby partners, UNICEF is setting up rapid-response teams for child protection in emergencies, and inter-agency emergency-preparedness training will be further rolled out. Strengthening skills of UNICEF staff and partners on preventing and responding to violations against children in armed conflict, including gender-based violence, will also be a focus.

42. While implementation of the Child Protection Strategy has been advancing in the field, strengthening the knowledge and skills of UNICEF staff and partners on the strategic approaches is essential to meet current and future needs in the sector. This augmentation of skills is especially important given the enhanced equity focus.

43. Noting the expanding interest and role of the private sector in child protection, in coming years, the focus on private-sector partnerships will be further sharpened. This entails moving beyond advocacy alone, to strengthened engagement with a more limited set of actors to achieve greater results for children on the ground.

44. While progress has been made in monitoring and evaluation, and data on child protection has expanded, challenges remain. MICS and DHS – which are also the largest sources of data for monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals – do not capture the situation of children living outside of households. This includes children in institutions, children in detention centres, children in the worst forms of child labour or children living on the street. Data collection on the scale and extent of violations against children in situations of armed conflict also present complex challenges. More comprehensive knowledge on the most vulnerable and marginalized, including children without family care who are not captured in household-based surveys, are vital to fully implement the organization’s equity focus. This includes ensuring that children’s voices are meaningfully captured and represented. Greater investment will be made in strengthening monitoring and evaluation in order to ensure that interventions are having a positive impact on the lives of the most marginalized and are in children’s best interests.

45. Specific child protection issues around which the international community and partners have coalesced, such as child trafficking, child labour, and children associated with armed forces and groups, continue to be the main interest for child protection funding. Greater support is required for the strategic approaches in child protection, using such ‘issues’ as an entry point. In addition, the time needed to ensure sustainable change needs to be better reflected in reporting and funding mechanisms.

46. The strength of UNICEF lies in bridging upstream and downstream work to deliver results for the most marginalized children. UNICEF has great potential to make further progress in child protection with strengthened multisectoral approaches. There are no ‘quick fixes’ but, as
demonstrated over recent years, progress is possible with the involvement of a diverse range of partners at all levels, and evidence-based actions that reinforce both prevention and response.