Thematic discussion on results and lessons learned in the medium-term strategic plan focus area 5: Policy advocacy and partnerships for children’s rights

Background document

I. Policy advocacy and partnerships: putting children first in national and international development agendas

1. Policy advocacy and partnerships is the focus area of the UNICEF medium-term strategic plan designed to strengthen the capacity of governments, agencies and societies to realize children’s rights. This focus area comprises four key components: the first is data collection, analysis and dissemination, and child poverty and disparities analysis; the second, research, analysis and technical advice on economic and social policy and issues. The third is advocacy to inform national policy and expand fiscal space for children; fostering civic participation by children and young people is the fourth. The work of UNICEF in this area ensures that Governments and donors have a long-term vision for meeting children’s rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and through the Millennium Development Goals, and that these priorities are specific, measurable and reflected in legislation, systems, policies, programmes and budgets.

2. This paper provides a background to the thematic discussion on focus area 5 at the 2012 first regular session of the Executive Board. It offers an overview of the situation of developing country Governments, together with lessons learned over the past five years and results-based examples of innovative work to strengthen government capacity, leverage resources and foster participation. It concludes by presenting new and emerging ways to deepen and broaden the policy advocacy and partnerships function in UNICEF in the coming years.

II. Turning crisis into opportunity

3. UNICEF has a long history of creating opportunity out of crises. The organization’s efforts to position children at the centre of development policy and planning, particularly in response to the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, had a tremendous impact. Now, given its
strong acumen in data collection, analysis and dissemination; in economic and social policy work in low- and middle-income countries; and in strategic partnerships with non-governmental organizations, other agencies and international financial institutions, UNICEF is better positioned than ever to do the same.

4. There are many parallels between the world of 20 years ago and today, as well as some key differences. Fiscal austerity measures again threaten the well-being of children, while a sluggish labour market continues to hamper global economic recovery. Deep inequalities both within and among countries marginalize millions, leaving many children excluded from the gains of economic and social progress achieved since the Millennium Development Goals were established in 2000.

5. At the same time, the world is more interconnected than ever before. The rise of middle-income countries, and the limited scope for programmes within those countries, makes the case for focusing on policy analysis, advice and advocacy even stronger. Evidence shows that bulk of the world’s poor now live in middle-income countries. Although this is partly an issue of country reclassification – the poor remain largely where they have always lived – it underlines the immense challenges in human development that remain in middle-income countries. In those countries where UNICEF retains a strong programmatic presence, economic and social policy is the foundation for creating a sound enabling environment for programmatic action and sustaining results.

6. The organization’s refocus on equity also provides a strong mandate for work in focus area 5, providing both the moral and practical argument for giving priority to the needs of the most marginalized children groups whose rights are denied. To effectively narrow the gaps, the social determinants of inequity must also be addressed along with its proximate manifestations. Further enhancing capacity in policy analysis, high-quality technical advice and advocacy, at both the global and national levels, and strengthening linkages between policy advocacy, strategic partnerships and programmatic action on specific sectors and issues, will be critical to the success of the UNICEF refocus on equity.

III. Creating an enabling policy environment to achieve equitable development for children

7. The renewed emphasis of UNICEF on equitable development for children comes at an opportune time, given the growing realization of the limitations of the internationally agreed development goals, targets and indicators set based on national aggregates. Since their inception, the Millennium Development Goals in particular have helped generate historic gains in human progress by setting global and national priorities, mobilizing billions of dollars, fuelling action on the ground, and galvanizing efforts to meet time-bound, measureable targets. The achievements are undeniable: since 2000, global poverty has declined significantly; child deaths have dropped dramatically; more children than ever are in school; access to safe drinking water has greatly expanded; and targeted investments in fighting malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis have saved millions of lives. Many countries, from Bangladesh to Malawi, Ecuador to India, have made great strides on much of the Millennium Development Goals agenda.

8. However, it is also clear that, despite these gains, the Millennium Development Goals agenda is far from complete. The remarkable progress at the global level and national aggregates in many countries has not always been equally enjoyed by all social and economic groups within nations. Millions of people – particularly the poorest and most marginalized, especially minorities and indigenous peoples, women and girls – are being left behind, and the disparities in key human
development indicators among and within countries remain daunting – and in many countries are widening.

9. A further realization is that the benefits of globalization – the economic integration of nations – have not been evenly spread. In recent decades, globalization has brought immense opportunities for many, gained through intensified flows of trade and investment, increased geographical mobility of peoples and the rapid exchange of ideas and technology. However, its benefits have remained highly skewed towards those already well off, and it has advanced in a world characterized by widening economic, environmental and social inequalities. In particular, the economic emergence of middle-income countries, while lifting millions out of poverty, has been accompanied by increasing disparities within economic and social groups within these countries. In short, the considerable attention given to fostering global economic growth since the early 1990s has not been matched by similar emphasis on social and environmental concerns. These trends, if unabated, pose grave risks to social and political stability and cohesion in advanced and developing countries alike.

10. Efforts to redress economic, social and environmental disparities are already underway, but also face two sets of challenges and related opportunities. The first challenge is the global economic crisis and concurrent austerity drive, which is squeezing resources for development. The opportunity arises in the fact that despite the prolonged uncertainty, there is evidence of a new willingness among policymakers to seek fresh approaches to the world’s challenges, and place greater emphasis on sustainability and equity in the post-2015 global development agenda.

11. The second is how to make globalization fairer, greener and more sustainable. The changing world necessitates renewed and intensified efforts to tackle the primary global risks to development, which include climate change, elevated food prices, sluggish labour markets, social exclusion, rapid urbanization, rising numbers of humanitarian crises, and widespread perceptions of unfairness and injustice in many countries. Such a refocus can have significant benefits to children, families and societies.

12. It is increasingly evident that compartmentalizing children’s needs through the pursuit of sector-specific targets is insufficient to address the full gamut of their rights – in effect, to take account of a concept advanced by UNICEF itself several decades ago, the whole child. To do so necessitates addressing issues of childhood and pre-adulthood that may fall outside of the current remit of international development goals, and that need to be articulated in the new set of targets currently being formulated in the nascent discussion on the post-2015 international development agenda. The whole-child view is more equitable than compartmentalized or sector-based development goals, as it recognizes that deprivations of children’s rights are more likely to occur simultaneously and to be more serious in socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Only a whole-child approach, which recognizes the interaction of multiple deprivations in myriad ways, can accurately measure the much greater impact of deprivations among social disadvantaged children and the nature of interventions that are required to adequately manage the increased vulnerability to and interactions among deprivations.¹

IV. Identifying the poorest and most disadvantaged children and families

13. Addressing inequities begins with identifying the poorest and most marginalized children and communities. Disaggregating national data to identify these groups, examine the types and the extent of the deprivations they experience, and to assess the factors that exclude them are fundamental to designing equitable development policies and programmes. UNICEF-supported multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS), along with United States Agency for International Development-supported Demographic and Health Surveys, provide a unique opportunity for identifying the most disadvantaged children by generating data for more than 100 development indicators disaggregated by factors such as geographic location, wealth quintile, sex, religion, language, ethnicity and educational attainment. Since 1995, UNICEF has played a leading role in data collection, supporting nearly 230 MICS surveys in more than 100 countries, providing a unique source of statistically sound and internationally comparable estimates for a range of indicators at national and subnational levels in the areas of child and maternal health, nutrition, education, child protection, water and sanitation and HIV/AIDS.

14. In recent years, and particularly with the organizational refocus on equity since mid-2010, quality analysis and data-driven sector reports – often produced in partnership with other United Nations agencies – have increasingly concentrated on examining the subnational pattern of progress and deprivation alongside national aggregates. Presentation of both aggregated and disaggregated indicators and their analysis are available in various publications produced by the organization’s Statistics and Monitoring Section, most notably the UNICEF flagship report *The State of the World’s Children*, and on the organization’s publicly available statistics website, *Child Info* ([www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org)). The UNICEF team of highly qualified data analysts leads the reporting on the health-related Millennium Development Goals (1, 2, 3, 6 and 7) and produces the global data series that contribute to the monitoring of 17 out of 44 Goal indicators. These efforts are supported by a series of inter-agency groups of leading experts in their respective fields. UNICEF also leads an inter-agency effort to increase the use of data in policy making at the national level. The *DevInfo* initiative, endorsed by the United Nations Development Group as a tool to monitor the Millennium Development Goals and human development at country level, is used to disseminate key development data in over 130 countries. The organization has been at the forefront of the development of new global indicators on children and women, effectively drawing on a combination of its long-term and sustained country presence and its extensive experience with reliable data collection.

15. Complementing the work on identifying the poorest children through data collection, analysis and dissemination, the organization’s work on child poverty and disparities at country-office levels examines material deprivations in seven critical dimensions: health, nutrition, education, water, sanitation, information and shelter. In particular, it focuses on the context in which inequities persist through cumulative disadvantage in these dimensions. Furthermore, analysis of multiple overlapping deprivations in these areas is being undertaken in a number of countries, and is beginning to identify more clearly than ever before the extent to which millions of children are denied their rights in many dimensions. Being able to identify these children, where they live and what they are deprived of, will provide critical support to the programme reorientation that took place, in 2011, with the aim of addressing inequities more effectively.

16. Additionally, a central purpose of both these initiatives is national ownership. On data collection, the UNICEF-supported MICS are government-owned and implemented by national statistics offices, with technical support and oversight provided by UNICEF. The organization also
works to build national statistical capacity of government and United Nations staff through training workshops and country-specific support. Similarly, the child poverty and disparities analysis applied at national levels involves a partnership between UNICEF, the Ministries of Finance and Planning, national statistics offices and universities.

V. Leveraging resources and policies for children

17. The UNICEF refocus on equity, aiming to lift the most vulnerable children out of poverty, comes at a critical juncture in the organization’s history. A growing number of developing countries are making the transition to middle-income status, and as they do so, policy advice, advocacy and partnerships are increasingly becoming a primary function of UNICEF work with national Governments and subnational authorities. More and more, governments are requesting these types of support, and UNICEF has become a partner of choice in shaping national economic and social policy.

18. Currently, the organization is engaged in legal, institutional and sector policy reform in 124 countries; social budgeting and public finance management initiatives in 102; social protection in 93; and child poverty and disparities analysis in 55 countries. In response, the number of posts for economic and social policy officers increased from less than a dozen in 2004 to 64 in 2007 and rose to 173 in 2011. Investment in the catalytic economic and social policy work of UNICEF has yielded tangible returns for children – as shown recently by country experiences presented in the organization’s Policy Matters magazine and the Lessons Learned compendiums, in work presented at the Global Consultation on Social Policy, Equity, Rights and Development (Pratolino IV) held in Florence, Italy, 21-24 February 2012, and at the regional level in regional management teams.

19. Numerous examples from the field show that investing in economic and social policy work is cost-effective for UNICEF, enabling it to maximize its contribution to sectoral programmes and helping ensure that public policies prioritize children. This orientation is crucial for middle-income countries, since UNICEF typically cannot afford to cover every social sector with a dedicated staff member. For example, in Ecuador, a $250,000 investment in a fiscal observatory led – with partner efforts – to a 400 per cent increase in the national health budget. In Mali, UNICEF policy advocacy contributed to the Government’s decision to increase the 2011 education and health budgets by 20 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively. In the Eastern and Southern Africa region, each dollar that UNICEF spends on social and economic policy advocacy typically generates a return of 8-10 times the investment in terms of additional national public expenditure on social sectors related to children. In Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF leveraged funding from the European Union to support the introduction of a new cash benefit for poor families with children and other interventions in preventative social services for children.

20. Significantly, UNICEF analysis and technical advice has increasingly led to a better and more equity-focused use of national resources. For instance, in South Africa, a UNICEF-commissioned study on child benefits led to government support for more than 1 million children who had been previously excluded for mainly administrative reasons.

21. Increasingly, the strength of UNICEF will be in leveraging national resources for children, providing technical assistance and advice, and advocating for the most disadvantaged children, in addition to UNICEF providing services in some cases. With national incomes and private financial flows to middle- and low-income countries growing at a far faster rate than official development assistance, UNICEF resources represent a minute and decreasing share of the total resources needed
to address the rights and needs of children. For that reason, the organization’s work on public policy is central to meeting the UNICEF mission for children today – and even more so in future.

VI. Partnering with children and youth

22. Participation, one of the guiding principles of the Convention, is important in advancing positive and holistic child and adolescent development. UNICEF aims to advance this fundamental right by promoting the participation of children and young people at all levels in policy development, and especially at the local level through their civic engagement. Furthermore, the organization recognizes that for children and youth to be able to participate meaningfully in decisions that impact their lives, it is important that they are well-prepared. It therefore promotes initiatives to develop capacities of children and adolescents with skills, confidence and maturity for expressing their views and influencing decisions.

23. UNICEF implements specific strategies to ensure the equitable participation of girls and boys, and seeks the views and opinions of children and young people through systematic processes; raises awareness and promotes positive attitudes and practices in families, schools, communities on children’s and adolescents’ rights to participation; supports equitable, regular participation of children and adolescents in local institutions and in the design and implementation of policies; and promotes policies and programmes that build the capacity of children and of adolescents to engage in civic action through volunteerism, community development and peaceful conflict resolution.

24. UNICEF has made much progress in the area of child participation. Three major lessons have emerged from this area of work. First, while the formal mechanisms to promote children and young people’s participation have increased at the national level, their engagement at the local level has seen only nominal gains. Second, promoting the participation of the most marginalized children and adolescents remains challenging. Finally, information and communications technology in general, and social media particularly, has become an important tool for obtaining views of children and adolescents and enabling them to share and exchange ideas, information and knowledge. Investing in each of these areas will be critical to building on the base of child participation initiatives currently in place.

VII. The way forward: Investing in data, research and knowledge, policy advocacy and partnerships for children

25. UNICEF has an enormous opportunity to achieve even greater results for children at scale by building on the strong base of work in focus area 5 that already exists. This aim must be fourfold.

(a) First, deepen understanding of childhood deprivation through enhanced collection, analysis and dissemination of data, and through analyses of global, regional and national economic and social trends, strategies, deprivations and disparities within countries, regions and at the global level.

(b) Second, strengthen the policy advisory capacity of UNICEF, and its ability to provide technical support and advocacy to Governments, partners and sectoral colleagues on issues important to equity and children, and ensure that national development plans and budgets provide adequate resources to meet children’s rights. The new monitoring
framework – the Monitoring Results for Equity System (MoRES) –provides a key role for economic and social policy work: to create an enabling environment, improve public financial management and augment the demand side of service delivery for children (e.g. through cash transfers). This will be critical to the organization’s work in middle-income countries, which are now home to the majority of the world’s poor children. UNICEF has a tremendous opportunity to make a difference in promoting equitable results for children in these countries, particularly in several core areas: situational analysis of children; building institutional capacity to safeguard children’s and women’s rights; support to periodic reporting process on treaties, notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child; providing technical advice and advocacy, focusing on persistent inequalities; supporting pilot activities and innovations that inform national policy; and leveraging domestic resources to promote children’s rights.

(c) Third, continue to serve as a national, regional and global advocate for child-friendly policies, promote investments on children – including the most disadvantaged – with Ministries of Finance, Planning and others, and promote awareness on the urgency to redress child rights violations. A particular area for attention and investment is social protection. Evidence shows that social protection can help to diminish disparities and increase utilization of essential services. Having social protection systems in place where crises occur also tends to bolster the resilience of poor households and children, and diminish the negative outcomes. The current strategy of UNICEF focuses on two strands: expanding coverage of social protection systems and making them more inclusive. UNICEF is a global broker on social protection, in conjunction with key partners such as the International Labour Organization. A global social protection framework has been developed, and UNICEF is leading in defining the role of child-sensitive social protection. Internally, better integration of social protection policies with programmes and emergency operations will be critical for both the sectoral areas in which UNICEF works and for the mounting move toward providing cash to poor households caught in emergencies. Finally, UNICEF needs to strengthen the organization’s knowledge and evidence about what works best, why, how, and in which contexts.

(d) Finally, further develop UNICEF country office relations with ministries of finance, international financial institutions, statistical agencies and civil society organizations through technical support, policy guidance and advocacy, to promote the rights of children, particularly the most disadvantaged. In recent years, the organization has built strategic partnerships with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Labour Organization and others, enabling UNICEF to have, among other gains, a greater voice in poverty reduction strategies, analysis of poverty and disparities and strengthening of social protection systems,. Ministries of finance and planning and statistical agencies are increasingly viewing UNICEF as a partner of choice that brings much needed expertise and a welcome different perspective to their work.

26. There are two broad advantages to this approach, bringing a substantial contribution to the organization’s strategic goals. One advantage for UNICEF is tactical: supporting sectoral programmes with greater investment in data work, social and economic policy analysis and strategic partnerships is a good way to maximize investments and outcomes for children, and ensure that gains are protected against emerging risks. Only policies, legislation and budgets that are centred on children as a high priority can guarantee that progress will be sustainable.

27. There is also a strategic advantage: the better Governments function, the more they become reliant on social and economic policies to spur sectoral engagement. Focus area 5 work has not only helped to generate more public finance for children, but has also assisted Governments in spending more wisely on proven programmes to improve children’s lives. Maximizing the impact of
available resources is imperative in these fiscally straitened times. Solutions that policy advocacy and partnerships have provided, particularly in social protection, are increasingly accepted as cost-effective measures to spur equitable investments in human development and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. Evidence on the impact of social protection programmes supported and leveraged by UNICEF points to significant gains in child protection, educational attainment and child health. Further, the financial assistance social protection provides often serves as a key lifeline supporting livelihoods and local economic development.

28. To realize the full potential of focus area 5, and to stay relevant as more and more developing countries transition to middle-income status, UNICEF must invest further in this area. Of grave concern is the absence of secure and long-term thematic funding for this focus area, particularly with the loss of a major donor in 2011. It is evident that UNICEF is becoming a leader in the tenets of focus area 5. With greater resources and attention applied to this function and better deployment, with closer integration with sectoral work, and with enhanced cross-country sharing of validated lessons learned in the policy field, UNICEF could begin to further assert its unique contributions in the fiscal arena, help to close the implementation gaps in service provision and create protective environments for children. Further, UNICEF will need to create the evidence and policy foundations for emerging areas of work, such as extractive industries, urbanization, migration, youth, demographic transitions, the green economy and the impact of climate change on children and livelihoods in poor communities.

29. A key area for attention is investing in data collection, analysis and dissemination. The United Nations has a key role in monitoring global development commitments, including the Millennium Development Goals. Reliable, comparable evidence on progress is fundamental for priority-setting and policy formulation. Without the key role of UNICEF in compiling, analysing and disseminating global data, the development community would be unable to assess progress against global development goals and targets. Few people realize the extent to which UNICEF efforts contribute to this global public good. These critical activities need to be supported and indeed enhanced.

30. Policy advocacy and partnerships are most definitely part of the present and future of UNICEF. The organization is committed to using the evidence generated through data collection and research to influence policy-making, and it fosters a results-orientation through impact monitoring, participation and accountability in its initiatives and those of its partners. As a United Nations organization and a partner of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, regional development banks and regional integration organizations, with a field presence in over 150 countries and its good standing with national partners, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations, UNICEF is strategically placed to play a unique role, through advocacy and leveraging, in maximizing resources towards achieving results for children.

31. Finally, UNICEF will have a unique role to undertake in shaping the world of the future: the organization has recently been nominated as the lead United Nations agency on the issue of inequality for consultations on the post-2015 international development agenda. This affords UNICEF an opportunity to help shape this agenda for children, particularly the poorest and most disadvantaged. The organization is in a strong position to fulfil this role, building on the base of what already exists, deploying its economic and social policy capacities to help ensure that equitable investments in the social sectors become core to evolving Millennium agenda, both now and in the post-2015 era.