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Report of the field visit of the Bureau of the Executive Board to Sri Lanka, 25 February to 2 March 2012**I. Introduction**

1. The field visit of the Bureau of the UNICEF Executive Board to Sri Lanka from 25 February to 2 March 2012 included the following members and representatives of the Bureau: H.E. Mr Macharia Kamau, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Kenya to the United Nations; H.E. Mr Conrod Cecil Hunte, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Antigua and Barbuda to the United Nations; Dr Nina Nordström, Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations; Ms Karin Kaup, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Estonia to the United Nations; Mr Askar Zhumabayev, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the United Nations. They were accompanied by Mr Nicolas Charles Pron, Secretary of the Executive Board.

2. The field visit allowed the Bureau to gain a first-hand understanding of UNICEF work at the country level. More specifically, the visit aimed at demonstrating concrete examples of UNICEF cooperation with the Government and with other partners, including the United Nations country team. Furthermore, the visit provided an opportunity for the members of the Bureau to understand better the issues and challenges facing children and women in Sri Lanka.

3. The delegation would like to express its gratitude to the Government of Sri Lanka for the opportunities for substantive dialogue with senior members of the Government.

4. The delegation would like to thank the UNICEF country team in Sri Lanka for the very carefully prepared and well organized visit, and for staff being readily available throughout the visit. The Bureau was particularly impressed by the commitment and dedication of Sri Lankan officials at every level and the UNICEF staff in Sri Lanka.

* E/ICEF/2012/9.

5. The programme of the visit consisted of two main components:

(a) Meetings in Colombo with the UNICEF country office, senior-level cabinet ministers and government officials, members of the United Nations country team, as well as key donors.

(b) A field trip to the Northern Province and the Central Province, where the Bureau had the opportunity to visit UNICEF projects in Jaffna, Pallai, Mullaitivu, Killinochi, and near Nuwara Eliya. The delegation met with local government representatives; users of health facilities; health workers; teachers; school administrators; students; members of community groups; and UNICEF staff.

6. The present report summarizes the briefings received by the Bureau members and concludes with the delegation's own observations.

II. Key issues facing children and women

Maternal and child health

7. Maternal, infant and child health indicators in Sri Lanka continue to stand out compared to other countries in the region. Sri Lanka has an under-five mortality rate of 21 per 1,000 live births (2007), significantly below the Asia-Pacific average of 59 per 1,000 live births, and a maternal mortality ratio of 37.36 per 100,000 live births, well below the regional average of 500. Basic immunization coverage reached 98 per cent in 2011. Nevertheless, owing to the prolonged conflict the number of medical facilities and medical personnel in the Northern Province is still inadequate. The Government continues to restore health infrastructure and attract health care workers to the most affected areas.

8. The delegation met with the Deputy Minister of Health, who welcomed UNICEF support in developing policies aimed at improving both access and the quality of healthcare and public health services. UNICEF is collaborating with the Government to implement equity approach in a number of programmes to tackle health-related issues within and among regions. The Bureau visited the District General Hospital in Mullaitivu district, which had provided medical care services to around 350,000 displaced people during the conflict. When resettlement commenced in 2009, the hospital's facilities were basic, which forced transfer of mothers with minor complications to be transported to facilities 150 km away. UNICEF interventions after 2009 have resulted in refurbishment of labour rooms, postnatal and antenatal wards and obstetric operation theatres, as well as human resources capacity building, provision of equipment and, most importantly, the new construction of maternity and paediatric wards.

Nutrition

9. Maternal and child malnutrition remains a challenge, adversely affecting children's physical and intellectual development. Nearly 17 per cent of babies are born with low birth weight in Sri Lanka. The prevalence of underweight children aged below five years stands at 21 per cent. Moreover, significant disparities exist in the nutritional status of children and women across the country. Stunting stands at 19 per cent, with district variations. UNICEF focus is on reducing malnutrition, neonatal mortality and the inequities between geographical areas. UNICEF is working closely with various ministries and other key stakeholders in reducing

malnutrition. Following UNICEF advocacy, the National Nutrition Council chaired by the President of Sri Lanka was established. Closely interlinked with the survival and development of children, malnutrition continues to be an obstacle for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Sri Lanka. UNICEF is working towards bridging gaps between high and low quintiles, with a focus on an equity-driven approach.

10. The delegation visited a tea plantation and a village in the Nuwara Eliya district where the sector predominantly employs women as the tea pickers. UNICEF has supported pilot projects aimed at reducing the number of children born with low birth weight, with interventions during pregnancy and children below the age of two years. The delegation visited a health centre and the home of a family where the malnutrition project has helped to bring a balanced meal to children. In the Northern Province, the Bureau members observed a school meal provided by the World Food Programme being prepared for school lunch. The populations tied to the plantations in Sri Lanka for their livelihoods have the worst indicators in health and nutrition of any population group in Sri Lanka. The delegation felt this area needed special attention from the Government in the months and years to come.

Water and sanitation

11. Sri Lanka is on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal 7 sub-target to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. National coverage estimates for water supply and sanitation are approximately 89 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively. However, despite such relatively high national figures, considerable disparities remain between urban and rural areas, the plantation sector and other geographic locations, and within districts. Water quality remains an issue. Approximately 85 per cent of schools across the country do not have functional sanitation facilities.

12. UNICEF played an important role as sector leader for water, sanitation and hygiene and education in internally displaced person (IDP) camps during the conflict; this involved mobilizing and coordinating partners to respond to the remaining IDP needs in a timely manner by providing safe water for drinking and cooking, temporary facilities for excreta disposal, washing and personal hygiene facilities and ensuring the privacy and security of women. The delegation observed water and sanitation conditions in schools, including an open well used for washing and drinking, dry toilets in schools requiring renovation as well as water toilets in renovated schools.

Education

13. Sri Lanka's long-standing record in providing free, compulsory education began with the development of the Education Act (1938), which provided the foundation for an education system considered to be among the best in South Asia. The challenge, however, remains in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, supporting communities and children through the challenging process of resettlement and reintegration into schools in the north and east of the country. As such, the provision of improved education services to address the significant regional disparities, especially in the northern and eastern provinces where schools and communities continue to recover from conflict, will have a long-term impact on economic growth, social cohesion, reconciliation and other social indicators.

Nonetheless, Sri Lanka has demonstrated a high commitment to education and is currently on track to meet Millennium Development Goal 2 on education.

14. UNICEF is working closely with the Ministry of Education, within the Education Sector Development Plan Framework, on capacity building at the national level and in several focus districts in the central plantation area, north and east of the country. With education being a central part of the UNICEF mandate, the visit provided the team with an opportunity to see how the education programme goes beyond providing books and refurbishing classrooms by ensuring that proper health care and nutrition is provided to children so that they can attend school and lead productive lives.

15. UNICEF contributed to the construction and reopening of many schools, with improved facilities. The introduction of the UNICEF child-friendly approach has contributed to educational achievements in public examinations. UNICEF assisted with the introduction of strategies, such as the school- and community-led attendance committees, to identify out-of-school children. As a result, an estimated 50 per cent of the out-of-school children identified in catchment areas of supported child-friendly schools were reintegrated in 2011. UNICEF also supports programmes for children to catch up on education they missed due to the conflict or other reasons, through an accelerated learning programme and basic literacy classes. Approximately 37,000 children benefited from interventions in 2011. The great readiness of the students to learn after their traumatic experience during conflict was illustrated by the positive results in recent examinations.

16. The Bureau members spoke to parents and children as well as school principals in the Northern Province and the southern provinces, and had the opportunity to meet with Government Agents. Among the needs identified were shortages of teachers in specific subjects. The UNICEF education programme in the Northern Province extended beyond the schooling of children and included awareness training for students and teachers' on adolescent nutrition.

17. In Mullaittivu, the Bureau visited the State Vocational Training Authority, working in partnership with UNICEF in providing vocational training and skills development for vulnerable youth in the Northern Province. The Bureau had an opportunity to interact with a range of children, among them some former child soldiers, at the vocational school. The Bureau gained insight from discussions with the former child soldieries regarding their experiences during the conflict.

18. However, following a visit to a childcare centre in a tea plantation in the Central Province, the Bureau members expressed concern over inadequate legislation in the areas of childcare and pre-school education.

Child rights protection

19. Sri Lanka is party to the major international legal instruments relevant to child rights. It also has national legislation aimed at guaranteeing the rights and social well-being of children. However, some of the legislation is outdated and currently under review in order to bring it in line with international law. In particular, the age for criminal responsibility is being raised from eighth years to twelve years. The national, regional and local capacities to implement child rights vary considerably. Many child rights issues are difficult to tackle due to inadequate or unavailable data. Especially children in the post-conflict Northern Province are in need of civilian

institutions capable of providing effective protection measures aimed at girls and boys of all ages. Children and young people who are ex-combatants are an especially vulnerable group in this respect. The justice system in Sri Lanka is beginning to recognize the special needs of children; the time needed to bring child abuse cases before courts is being substantially shortened. The domestic employment of children under 14 is being successfully prosecuted, and the practice has diminished considerably.

20. UNICEF works to build capacity to protect the rights of children and adolescents in Sri Lanka. This is done in close cooperation with the Government and regional and local authorities. Care is now understood more broadly, entailing a multitude of measures to help families take care of their children. Social safety nets are needed, especially for the most deprived children, including adopted children, and UNICEF assists in the development of equitable institutions and practices. In particular, UNICEF continues to support measures to develop a child-friendly justice system, with the aim of it including, among other elements, specialized police, magistrates and judges as well as counselling for abused and neglected children. UNICEF efforts also address the issue of children separated from their families, which became particularly critical at the end of the conflict in 2009. Reunification efforts have only recently begun; this difficult work can be expected to continue for some time. UNICEF also is tackling another issue related to separation, the situation of children whose adult family members, often a single parent, leave them behind in order to go abroad to seek employment.

21. The delegation visited a Children's Court, which is in the process of beginning its work in Jaffna, in the Northern Province. It also had the opportunity to become acquainted with the family tracing work of the Department of Probation and Childcare at Mullaitivu. Both visits afforded a possibility for open discussion with officials. In the case of the reunification efforts at Mullaitivu, the delegation also had the opportunity to meet with members of separated families. Furthermore, the delegation had the opportunity to talk to several health professionals who had hands-on experience treating cases of child abuse, including cases of sexual violence. The delegation also benefited greatly from discussions with the Solicitor General and specialists from the Ministry of Justice.

Humanitarian and early recovery

22. Sri Lanka has recently witnessed two types of humanitarian crisis: a devastating tsunami in December 2004 and three decades of armed conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Government in the North and East. The conflict ended in May 2009. The humanitarian phase is gradually ending, and the transition from relief to development has started.

23. The number of IDPs peaked after the end of the conflict in May 2009, with approximately 260,000 people in camps, including 90,000 children, and has since gradually decreased. As of February 2012, approximately 6,000 people, including approximately 2,000 children, remained in Menik Farm camp. The 2009 wave of IDPs added to earlier waves of displacement. UNICEF was the cluster lead in the IDP camps in water, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition and education, and shared coordination responsibilities in the health and child protection clusters. Two and a half years after the end of the conflict, cluster participation and coordination is no longer predominant on the UNICEF agenda, since this task has been assumed by the

Government. The delegation did not visit the last remaining camp in Menik Farm, but had the opportunity to observe the return and resettlement of IDPs in the Northern Province. Approximately 432,500 people from various waves of displacement had returned to the province by the end of January 2012. This was achieved by various means: restitution, replacement of land, compensation, providing temporary living space or settlement with host families. UNICEF played a lead role in supporting the Government in the resettlement of IDPs to their places of origin in late 2009; it has continued to do so in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The precondition of return and resettlement is clearance of landmines and unexploded ordnance. The delegation had the opportunity to hear directly from the Governor of the Northern Province and the Government Agent of Jaffna about the Government's efforts in assisting in return and resettlement; it was informed that the last IDPs would be returning home by July 2012.

24. In December 2004, approximately two thirds of the Sri Lankan coastal line was affected by a tsunami, resulting in deaths of more than 35,000 people, one third of whom were children, and leading to the displacement of more than one million people. UNICEF contributed in both the emergency and the reconstruction phases. The delegation was informed that the Government has since established a Disaster Management Centre to coordinate disaster-related activities. The delegation also learned that, after the 2004 tsunami, the Government invested in a tsunami early-warning system to detect seismological movements and provide alerts to the emergency response mechanisms of the authorities.

III. The role of UNICEF in Sri Lanka

25. UNICEF engagement in Sri Lanka remains extensive and impressive. In all its major areas of programme activity, contained in its UNICEF county programme document, UNICEF has an effective footprint in planning, policy support, communication, humanitarian and physical project support.

26. The Bureau members noted that UNICEF has played a strong and strategic role in leveraging the resources of the Government and other development partners for children. This is particularly evident in the intersectoral nutrition programme targeting the 'at risk' families. The Bureau members emphasized that Sri Lanka's experience in achieving high standards of health and education with limited resources could provide an excellent model from which other countries could learn.

27. The Bureau had the opportunity to meet with provincial and county governors, local officials and technical counterparts. In every instance, Bureau members were impressed by the excellent working relationship between UNICEF and its government counterparts, and by the strong commitment of the authorities to engage with local communities to take successful innovative projects to scale.

28. The Bureau also has good interactions with many members of the United Nations country team and came away from these encounters impressed by the good and constructive working relationships within the United Nations country team and between the United Nations agencies and the Government.

Observations

29. The Bureau welcomed the opportunity of witnessing the activities of UNICEF in Sri Lanka and, during the field visit, appreciated very much the dedication, hard work and efficiency of the office in the areas of education, malnutrition and child protection.

30. The Bureau noted with satisfaction the excellent cooperation between UNICEF and the government institutions in the development of norms and standards and the formulation of key policies affecting children. The Bureau was impressed with the sharp focus of UNICEF on its comparative advantages, providing strategic policy advice in national programmes. Being a relevant partner for Sri Lanka was possible not least because UNICEF has attracted top-level international staff as well as dedicated and skilled local staff.

31. The Bureau appreciated the clear focus of UNICEF on the most vulnerable population groups and the most disadvantaged geographical areas. Furthermore, the efforts made to strengthen disaggregation of data to reveal social disparities as a basis for advocacy and programme planning were found to be very important.

32. The Bureau welcomed, as an important strategy for achieving results for children, UNICEF efforts to influence policies, legislation and public spending towards the most disadvantaged.

33. The Bureau noted the importance of maintaining a minimum level of core programme resources in order to sustain UNICEF capacity to provide high-level technical advice and to influence policies.

34. The Bureau is of the view that the UNICEF programmes in Sri Lanka have had a very effective and meaningful impact on children's lives in the Northern Province and the Central Province, and there is strong country ownership of programmes and a deep commitment from the Government of Sri Lanka. The Bureau welcomed the strong emphasis by UNICEF on national ownership, which was evident throughout the visit.

35. UNICEF engagement with partners, civil society and communities, as well as the private sector, were good examples of the added value and multiplier effect that UNICEF can bring by acting as a catalyst and bringing different partners together.

36. The members of the Bureau noted the good cooperation within the United Nations country team, as reflected in the large number of joint programmes, especially in schools and feeding programmes. The Bureau was informed by UNICEF staff that close cooperation among agencies on policies, as well as some cooperation on administrative matters, takes place at the national level. The delegation congratulates UNICEF for the partnerships established at all levels with the government ministries and with the local authorities at the provincial and community levels to achieve results for children through evidence-based advocacy and action.

37. The members of the Bureau appreciated the critical role UNICEF plays in support of the Government in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and in supporting the protection and fulfilment of the rights of children and women in Sri Lanka. The delegation observed that the Government is open to ideas and willing to commit resources for programmes and projects that could have positive impact and enrich children's lives. Therefore, UNICEF, given its credibility, has ample scope to continue its innovative work and act as a catalyst to initiate pertinent projects and programmes in Sri Lanka.

Annex

Summary of the programme of the field visit to Sri Lanka by the Bureau of the Executive Board

Colombo

Monday, 27 February

- Meeting with the Secretary to the Ministry of External Affairs
- Meeting with all staff
- Briefing by the Representative and the country management team

Jaffna

- Visit to the Jaffna Children's Court
- Meeting with the Governor of Northern Province

Killinochchi

Tuesday, 28 February

- Visit to Pallai Central College
- Visit to a school, Udayarkaddu Maha Vidyalyam
- Meeting with Special Forces Commander
- Meeting with the Government Agent of Mullaittivu
- Visit to the Vocational Training Centre Authority supported by UNICEF
- Visit to Mullaittivu District General Hospital

Wednesday, 29 February

- Visit to UNICEF-supported projects in tea estates in Nuwara Eliya Divisional Secretary Division

Colombo

Thursday, 1 March

- Meeting with the Chief Secretary and the Government Agent on the Nutrition Project
- Meeting with Ministry of Education
- Meeting with the Minister of Health
- Dinner with partners, donors and members of civil society

Friday 2 March

- Joint UNICEF/Government launch of *The State of the World's Children 2012*, attended by the Senior Minister for International Monetary Cooperation
- Meeting with Ministry of Justice
- Meeting with Attorney General