Oral briefing on the response of UNICEF to recent humanitarian situations

Background Note

Purpose

1. Following the request from the Executive Board, this briefing provides an update of the humanitarian action of UNICEF since the last overview provided to the Executive Board in June 2010.

2. Twelve days into 2010, an earthquake shattered Haiti, a country whose children were already living in difficult situations. UNICEF’s contribution to the response required a massive mobilization of resources. This was particularly difficult given that the United Nations itself was gravely affected. Later in the year, in July, as floodwaters submerged one-fifth of Pakistan, UNICEF mounted another extraordinary, organization-wide response, drawing on its resources from all around the globe.

3. In the face of these two watershed events, coupled with other crises, UNICEF mounted its largest and most complicated humanitarian response since the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, mobilizing the entire organization to achieve results for children. The scale and complexities of these two emergencies also compelled a self-reflection on how to improve UNICEF’s humanitarian systems and respond to its inter-agency commitments to protect and fulfil rights for children and women in emergencies.

4. Humanitarian action has always been at the core of UNICEF’s mandate, but was at the forefront throughout 2010. Crises – both conflicts and disasters – became more complicated, with considerable impact and challenges. In addition to earthquakes in Haiti, Indonesia, Chile and China, drought and worsening malnutrition in Niger and the Sahel region, floods in Pakistan and cholera in Haiti, the grim reality is that civil unrest did not ebb, with protracted crises in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan, and new or continued conflicts in Kyrgyzstan, Philippines and other countries. In late 2010, UNICEF started multi-regional contingency planning to prepare for possible humanitarian needs around the January 2011 referendum in South Sudan.

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* E/ICEF/2011/1.
During the emergencies of last year, the total numbers of people affected were daunting – 21 million in Haiti and Pakistan alone,¹ and, as in the past, the most vulnerable were the most gravely affected.

5. The revised Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs), which are UNICEF’s central humanitarian policy, were adopted to reflect the changes in the context in which humanitarian action takes place and lessons learned. Strengthened preparedness, early recovery and disaster-risk reduction are now anchored in UNICEF humanitarian action. UNICEF also ensured that our work with integrated presences was better leveraged to enhance results for children in the field. It worked to reinforce its humanitarian partnerships through a revised Programme Cooperation Agreement that guides its extensive work with civil-society organizations. UNICEF held a global humanitarian consultation with non-governmental organizations, enhancing ties with key partners to together work towards better results for children. Several tools were developed specifically for the organization’s work in increasingly high-risk environments, including guidance, training for staff, and contributions to the inter-agency efforts to protect humanitarian principles. UNICEF also committed significant resources to mainstream gender in humanitarian action and through the clusters it leads at the global level.

6. The achievements of 2010 were underscored with the recognition that UNICEF must become better equipped to respond to rising demand globally, in particular to emergencies of the scale and complexity of Haiti and Pakistan. While internal and external surge deployment totalled 998 personnel for the year (nearly quadrupling the 2009 sum of 259), the organization re-structured a dedicated Human Resource Emergency Unit following the Haiti earthquake and continues working to ensure the necessary deployment without weakening other country offices already in humanitarian situations. Donor contributions topped $1 billion – second only to 2005, which was dominated by tsunami funding – but more than half went to Haiti and Pakistan, obscuring needs in many underfunded emergencies. UNICEF’s cluster leadership was central to the inter-agency response to Haiti, Pakistan and other emergencies, but also underscored the need to clarify accountabilities and funding issues – which UNICEF is addressing internally and with cluster partners and donors.

7. International frameworks for grave rights violations were strengthened, calling for more accountability. UNICEF continued to play a key role on the children and armed conflict agenda, including in the monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM). For the first time, UNICEF gathered all the country office representatives and regional directors from countries working on the MRM and agreed on concrete action to build the capacity to play this role as part of overall child protection.

8. Lastly, UNICEF is committed to better integrating its humanitarian and development work in order to address underlying vulnerabilities and help prevent and mitigate suffering. Efforts are underway to risk-inform country programmes, mainstream disaster risk reduction and peacebuilding, and improve our capacity development approaches.

Haiti

9. The year since the 12 January 2010 earthquake in Haiti has seen results for children in many areas, yet further advocacy and action are urgently needed to address all the rights of Haitian children and women. In addition to coordinating more than 430 partners in the clusters for education, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene, as well the child protection sub-cluster,

¹ Over 3 million affected in Haiti, from Children of Haiti, Milestones and looking forward at six months, July 2010, UNICEF; over 18 million in Pakistan, from Children in Pakistan, Every Child’s Right – Responding to the Floods in Pakistan, December 2010, UNICEF.
UNICEF’s programmes reached some 680,000 people with safe water at the height of the response; over 720,000 children were provided education materials; and some 1.9 million children have been immunized against seven vaccine-preventable diseases. UNICEF continues to play a critical role in the cholera response through treatment centres and units, and oral rehydration corners, while advocating for a more decentralized approach.

10. Yet the situation of the many people still displaced requires an urgent resolution by the Haitian Government with the collaboration of the international community. While the numbers seem to have dropped, 380,000 children continue to live in camps, facing heightened risks of gender-based violence, trafficking and abuse. UNICEF can foster a more favourable environment for return to normalcy by shifting from direct service delivery in camps to setting up services in neighbourhoods of origin. This can be done through innovations, such as cash assistance, for example, to facilitate access to services upon families’ return to their homes, or other options, as needed. UNICEF will be implementing a pilot to facilitate return and also advocate and coordinate with others to overcome political and financial bottlenecks of recovery that hamper the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) – debris removal, land rights, rebuilding and reconstruction of houses. We will also advocate for others to pilot other experiences to boost return, rather than await the perfect plan or conditions to start the return process.

Indonesia

11. Three major disasters hit the archipelago in late 2010: flash flooding in West Papua; the earthquake and tsunami off West Sumatra; and the Mount Merapi volcano. Under the strong Government leadership and national coordination mechanisms, such as those established after the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, UNICEF provided assistance to families to protect children from preventable diseases, access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and early childhood development. UNICEF also advocated for breastfeeding following the displacement caused by the volcano. As part of the recovery from the 2009 West Sumatra earthquake, UNICEF also worked with the Government in the areas of water, education and child protection services and on contingency planning and simulations.

Pakistan

12. Over 18 million people – one in 10 Pakistanis – were affected by flooding that engulfed an area the size of England, exacerbating previous internal displacement. As floodwaters swept from north to south, the situation evolved very differently in the four main affected provinces, with people returning to their previous communities in the north – and often finding little remaining or facing snowfall – while floodwaters and displacement continued in southern Sindh province. UNICEF provided a comprehensive, large-scale response by augmenting its already significant programmes and through its lead role in cluster coordination.

13. To fulfil its cluster-lead responsibilities, UNICEF quickly established a structure of 60 people (cluster coordinators and information managers, nationally and in four provinces), at a cost of $6.5 million. Despite increasing engagement, promoting partner participation in the clusters and reporting to the clusters remained challenging. As the cluster coordination will be in place through July 2011, the priority is to strengthen coordination and the role of local authorities to reach the most vulnerable.

14. The results of the UNICEF response included reaching 3.5 million people with clean water and 1.9 million people through sanitation and hygiene services; supporting 44,000 ‘Lady Health Workers’ in community-level health provision to reach women and girls; providing vaccines for some 9 million children for measles and polio immunization; restoring access to education for 180,000 children through temporary learning spaces; and providing a protective environment for some 200,000 vulnerable children and women through child-friendly spaces. The floods also
allowed critical entry points to address education, enrolment, especially of girls, and child protection systems.

15. But challenges in Pakistan remain. Notably, the floods may have uncovered high levels of child malnutrition, further aggregated by the emergency. New survey results from Sindh reveal critical levels of malnutrition among flood-affected children. Data from the Sindh Department of Health recorded a global acute malnutrition (GAM) rate of 23.1 per cent in children aged 6-59 months in flood-affected areas of Northern Sindh and 21.2 per cent in Southern Sindh, which means that around one in five children between the ages of 6 months and 59 months is malnourished. UNICEF and other nutrition cluster partners are working with the government of Sindh to carry out a robust response that focuses on acute malnutrition management and prevention over 18 months.

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