Menstruation is a healthy and natural part of the reproductive process that begins when girls enter puberty, the biological process that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood (UNICEF, 2015). However, millions of adolescent girls and women across the world are denied their right to health and dignity because they lack the right information, facilities and products to manage their monthly menstrual cycle. Poverty, lack of basic services, gender inequality, discriminatory social norms and cultural taboos, all cause girls’ and women’s menstrual hygiene needs to go unmet. Girls may also face stigma, teasing, harassment and exclusion from friends and family during menstruation. All of this has a range of negative impacts on their lives such as: more limited mobility, freedom and choices; missed days of school or limited participation in educational and social activities in and out of school; social exclusion and increased risk of physical and sexual violence; anxiety, low self esteem and depression. The topic of menstruation remains a taboo in many societies, especially in the indigenous communities. Cultural practices, religious beliefs and social myths make it difficult for both men and women to talk about menstruation, leaving children and adolescents uninformed and unprepared. In schools, adolescent girls often face the discomfort of having to manage their menstrual hygiene throughout the day in toilets that are unclean, lack running water, and have no doors, discreet disposal facilities, or access to sanitary products. This may cause girls to miss out on educational opportunities.

In Belize, much of the information on the impact of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) on girls’ education has been anecdotal. This is principally because the direct causes of absenteeism/drop-out are difficult to measure, particularly at scale. There is currently not enough data to understand the experiences of girls in Belize regarding menstruation, specifically in the school setting, and therefore provide recommendations to improve health and education outcomes. To begin to address this gap, UNICEF Belize and the national WASH technical working group undertook a formative assessment interviewing girls and boys aged 10-14 years old in selected primary and secondary schools, school administrators, and parents across Belize. The objectives of the exercise were:

- To investigate and understand the range of challenges faced by school girls during menstruation - as well as the determinants of those challenges in rural and urban settings;
- To compare and contrast the varied challenges and determinants across cultural contexts and identify points of intervention that may help girls overcome these challenges in schools;
- To provide key recommendations to inform school planning;
- To inform the development of a ‘basic package of interventions’ and institutional arrangements that can be implemented and sustained at scale across cultural contexts.

Jessica Mirano of Johns Hopkins University presents a drawing discussing menstrual hygiene management and factors that may impact young girls.
The preliminary findings of the assessment were categorized into five factors: biological, personal, interpersonal, environmental and societal.

**Biological:** Some girls reported chronic pain that limited their involvement in sporting and physical activities with some experiencing more advanced physical symptoms suggesting possible iron and folic acid deficiencies.

**Personal and interpersonal factors:** Several misconceptions were uncovered in the study. Some of these were related to what foods can and can’t be eaten during the time of menstruation. Others linked menstruation and HIV/AIDS, while others centred around bathing during a menstrual period and yet more suggested that women and girls are demon-possessed during that period of time. As a result, many girls reported feelings of anxiety and shame associated with what is a natural biological occurrence for women and girls. Bullying and teasing as well as changed dynamics in the relationship with boys were also reported and many girls still receive incomplete or incorrect advice on menstruation. Girls reported being told that being hugged or touched by boys during their period could lead to pregnancy. While boys demonstrated some interest, their level of knowledge on menstruation is low, while girls reported boys teasing and making jokes about their periods.

Many girls reported that their mothers treated them differently following their first menstruation, giving them less time to play, increased chores, frequent reminders of their now being “a lady and needing to be careful with their interaction with boys”.

**Environmental factors:** Findings from the study suggested much room for improvement. Girls reported the inaccessibility of school bathrooms as these are often locked. They also pointed out the lack of needed basic supplies like soap and toilet paper, and the general uncleanliness of school restrooms. Girls and boys(?) also reported poor disposal of sanitary pads suggesting that girls need more guidance on hygiene and safe disposal. Sanitary pads are rarely available in schools and the prices in stores varied from area to area with some reporting unaffordable products.

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UNICEF’s commitment to Belize dates back to 1954. Environmental health, vector control, school feeding and the provision of primary school textbooks and supplies were initially a part of our work in the country. The UNICEF office was established in 1981, the same year that Belize gained its independence.

Presently, UNICEF’s Country Programme in Belize focuses on national policy and programme support with the Government of Belize as well as partnerships with children, communities and other actors to achieve child-sensitive, equitable and sustainable development. The Country Programme priorities include reducing multidimensional poverty and strengthening child rights monitoring, strengthening lifelong learning, young child survival and child and adolescent well-being, and strengthening access to justice and reducing violence. As a partner in efforts to shape a Belize fit for children and women, UNICEF has supported education efforts, early childhood development, legal and institutional reform, and stronger systems for child justice and health for children and adolescents, child and adolescent participation, data management, monitoring and evaluation.

As one of the UN system partners in Belize, UNICEF supports the implementation of the United Nations Multi-Country Sustainable Development Framework (UNMSDF) that aligns the signed Country Programme Document 2017-2021, with the country’s Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the new National Result Framework for Children and Adolescents (the Children’s Agenda). UNICEF’s work for children is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and our work in Belize aims to ensure that Belize can achieve inclusive and sustainable development through social transformations and establishment of systems and programmes that recognize, protect and fulfil the rights of every child, particularly the most vulnerable.

ABOUT OUR NEWSLETTER

“Houn sun irahũñũ” meaning “For all the children” … The words from the indigenous language of Garifuna meaning “for all the children” is the name chosen for our newsletter. It embodies the mission of our organization… advocating for the rights of every child, ensuring that every child has a fair chance to a high quality of life. The Garifuna language was recognized on May 18, 2001 by UNESCO as “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangibles Heritage of Humanity.” The purpose of the newsletter is to highlight the work of UNICEF Belize implemented alongside our collaboration and partnership with government, civil society, children, adolescents and other national partners.
UNICEF’s mission statement emphasizes our commitment to the most disadvantaged children. For all children, and especially the most disadvantaged, UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children’s rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. Eight years ago, UNICEF released the report Narrowing the Gaps to Meet the Goals, an urgent call for a stronger focus on equity to accelerate the pace of development and achieve child survival goals. The report noted the remarkable and life-changing progress made for children, just 5 years before the end of the MDG era: under five mortality had fallen by one third between 1990 and 2009; net primary school enrolment had risen to 88 percent in the developing world; almost all regions in the world had attained gender parity in primary education; 1.8 billion people had gained access to improved drinking water and the global rise in HIV prevalence had been successfully halted, stabilizing one of the worst epidemics in our generation. Yet, a review of the data showed that everywhere, from access to services, to quality housing, education outcomes, protection, inclusion and opportunities to survive and thrive, the poorest children and most marginalized populations were the least likely to benefit as they were disproportionately affected by deprivation of their rights. So in the run up to the end of the MDG era and the dawn of the shift towards SDGs and a global compact for sustainable and inclusive development, the urgency in aiming for equity was clear and UNICEF’s call for equity invited all people, children, communities and policy to answer the basic questions in all our actions:

- Are we reaching the most deprived children and communities?
- Are we confident that we are investing in interventions proven to deliver results?
- Have we identified and addressed the underlying barriers to change and success?
- Have we established the right partnerships and made effective use of innovation in strategy and use of technology to enable both service delivery and sustainable change in communities?
- Have we provided sufficient resources – time, human resources, funding, and tools - to strengthen national and community systems and insure sustainability?

The Sustainable Development goals have similarly challenged us to move from a focus on the general to the specific, outlining more than 100 specific targets to be measured and reported on by States in pursuit not only of eradication of poverty and disease but achievement of social transformation, protection and optimization of human, cultural, environmental and technological capital and the achievement of inclusive and sustainable growth that reflects the connectedness and interdependence between people, States, our natural environment and generations ahead. At the end of 2017, to serve as a companion guide on achievement of the SDGs for children, UNICEF launched a new organizational strategy that builds on this vision for equity as a pivotal focus of our work. UNICEF’s new Strategic Plan presents 5 key goals to be achieved in times of calm and in emergencies, and with attention to gender equality. These goals will serve as a lens through which we will assess our progress towards equity and sustainable development in the lives of children:

Goal 1: Every child survives and thrives;
Goal 2: Every child learns;
Goal 3: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment;
Goal 4: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation; and
Goal 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life;

Our work with our partners in Belize rises to this challenge. UNICEF’s programme of support in Belize is working to strengthen monitoring of the rights of children and contributing to the reduction of poverty in children in all its dimensions. This emphasis on monitoring and data improvement aims to improve our collective capacity to identify the most vulnerable and track specific progress towards equity and inclusion for every child and in every sector. We also support promotion of lifelong learning recognizing that in Belize, the ability to learn is determined by effective and sustained investment in improved quality of health and life from pregnancy and through early childhood and adolescence, for all children and by respect and fulfilment of the rights of children and families and measures to secure their continued inclusion in learning. And finally, we support strengthening of measures to ensure safety and justice for children for every child. Our support and partnerships in Belize focus on strengthening of the national systems, policies, legislation and approaches for implementation through collaboration with children and communities to generate local insight.

MARKING THE MILESTONES – IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE #FOREVERYCHILD:

In 2017, we were privileged to have been part of amazing partnerships contributing to results such as the following:
Reducing Multidimensional Poverty and Monitoring the Rights of Children:

a) Strengthening of Children’s Advisory Bodies (CABs) now in the 9 municipalities of Belize to support the sustainable Child-Friendly Municipality initiative (SCFM);
b) Finalization and launch of the national Children’s Agenda for 2017-2030;
c) Finalization and dissemination of the Belize Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS5) providing key data reflecting fulfillment of children’s rights.

Lifelong Learning:

a) Training of ECD providers -including midwives, rovers, health educators, and preschool teachers - in Care for Child Development;
b) Establishment of an interagency mechanism to lead implementation and monitoring of the national Early Child Development (ECD) strategy.

Safety and Justice for children:

a) Provision of child-friendly services through free legal aid and family courts;
b) Development of protocols for the national diversion programme; and
c) In collaboration with non-governmental , psychosocial and legal support has been provided to children and awareness has been raised through community services targeting children, parents, and teachers focusing on child abuse, reporting procedures, and positive alternatives to violence including music, sports, art, & dance.

Building on our mandate and achievements from 2017, our work with Government, civil society and youth partners in 2018 will aim to achieve the following:

• Facilitate a national dialogue around Social Protection, support the development of a National Social Protection Strategy and a national index to measure multidimensional poverty, with an emphasis on children and adolescents;

• Continue improving national and sub-national capacities to systematically collect, analyse and use disaggregated data to monitor, inform policy decisions, and report on the situation of children, including through enhancing children participation at local and national levels and through the use of innovations and mobile technology;

• Enhance results in health and lifelong learning of children and adolescents by consolidating support for the effective implementation and increased reach of the ECD policy, including through the Roving Caregivers programme, the implementation of parenting interventions, improvement in medical laboratories for diagnostic services in under-served rural communities, and development of an adolescent health strategy;

• Continue to increase the country capacity to promote and ensure justice and systems that enable the prevention and treatment of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. This will include quality of services by the child friendly Family Courts, promotion of positive alternatives to violence, and capacity strengthening of child protection and social workers.

For every step of the way in 2018 and certainly at the end of this year, we will ask that central question to assess our progress and impact: Through our advocacy, technical and financial support, partnerships and presence, have we made a difference for the most disadvantaged children in Belize? Looking at the work laid out for 2018 with our partners, we are confident and excited that the answer to this question will be a resounding “Yes!”
That could precisely sum up the aims and objectives of the Sustainable and Child Friendly Municipality Initiative being implemented in Belize by the Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development (MLLGRD) since 2014 in nine municipalities in partnership with the Mayors Association, UNICEF and UNDP. “The concept behind the initiative is to create awareness and promote activities at the subnational level aimed at implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,” said UNICEF’s Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist Paulette Wade. Ms. Wade has been the lead programme person for the initiative since its inception.

Through the SCFM initiative, local authorities, civil society experts and most importantly children and adolescents work together to define plans that respond uniquely to the needs of their municipality. As we celebrated the close of year three with an end of year exhibition and meeting, the highlights were reports, presentations and municipal project models presented by each municipal Children Advisory Body. It was clear to see that the main objective to mobilize community actors and most importantly children was being well achieved. The presentations from the children were clearly centered around the main pillars that each municipality was called to commit. These include providing public assets that promote play and leisure; encouraging the participation and expression of citizenship from children and adolescents; ensuring that children are provided safety and protection within their communities; that communities provide access to health and social services to support the children’s development; that educational services are accessible and inclusive and that the municipality promotes robust civic engagement. Additionally, the recommendations from the CABs focused on expanding parks and recreation spaces with inclusive design so these facilities would be accessible for children with disabilities; focusing on establishing programmes that would engage at risk youths and their families; training of media on protecting children’s rights and ethical reporting as it relates to children issues and increased education and public advocacy campaigns that will educate children as to the harmful effects of drugs, alcohol and tobacco along with engagement in gang and violent illicit activities.

As the gathering listened to the children, the wide eyes and broad smiles demonstrated how impressed everyone was and underscored a realization that we often underestimate children. The room was filled with the robust banter of the adolescents and the encouragingly positive spirit of collegiality and competition. The SCFM and CAB provide a platform for child and adolescent volunteers to lead and participate in activities of clean-up campaigns around their communities, public advocacy targeting bullying and all forms of violence, and training events including one focused on psychosocial techniques to help children cope with trauma. Violence is a major challenge in Belize and the MICS5 data indicates that children’s homes are where most children in Belize first experience or witness chronic violence. Over 60% of adolescents aged 10 – 14 years of experience violent discipline methods and children under the age of 5 years are more likely than any other age group, to be beaten as a form of discipline while more than half of all older children experience continuous psychological aggression as a form of discipline. Central in the year’s activities was the CABs’ outreach as they canvassed their communities for the Belize TIME OUT campaign, reaching out as peer educators and child advocates in this campaign to end violence against children. To address the widespread violent discipline in homes, the campaign asks adults to pledge to take a two-minute time out before disciplining a child violently. Across the country, the members of the CABs got police officers and community members to raise their hands in a commitment to promote and uphold the rights of children to be free from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect.
Recommendations from the CABs for 2018 focused on expanding park and recreation spaces with inclusive design so these facilities would be accessible for children with disabilities; focusing on establishing programmes that would engage at risk youths and their families; training of media on protecting children’s rights and ethical reporting as it relates to children’s issues and increased education and public advocacy campaigns that will educate children as to the harmful effects of drugs, alcohol and tobacco along with engagement in gang and violent illicit activities.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Youth, Sports and Culture Hon. Patrick Faber was awe-inspired by the children. After engaging in a vigorous discussion with them about governance and policies, particularly about the relevance of our education system, he conceded that indeed while sounding cliché, children are our future. He enthusiastically acquiesced to a special request from one of the youths and said, "Hear me now, I have saved the best for last: I am here at this very moment committing government’s financing for one secondary school scholarship and one tertiary education scholarship for a child from each Children Advisory Body.”

In addition, he committed to donating three IPads to each CAB to enable the CAB network to communicate and to do their work in each municipality more efficiently. He remarked that the technological gift will aid the children by enhancing their skills in utilizing technology in all their spheres of engagement.

Reacting to the announcement on the donation, the Project Manager for the SCFM initiative in the MLLGRD smiled broadly and said, “You bet I will be following up on that. Our children deserve that.” She has often commented on how fulfilling her job is and what a pleasure it is to work with the children. She never fails to remind everyone, “You just can’t underestimate children. They are very intelligent, understand the issues and have views all their own. They need the continued opportunity to express themselves.”

The day and year ended with a tall order for the next, but with the commitment of all partners, government, the Project Manager; the MLLGRD, UNICEF, UNDP and the Mayors Association for the continuation of the programme and a reiterated commitment to the guarantees enshrined in the SCFM initiative. #ForEveryChild – an opportunity to influence decision making; a space to express their views; the chance to participate fully in family and community life; the provision of safe drinking water, basic social services for health and education; freedom from exploitation and violence; green spaces to play and recreate and respect for cultural, religious and personal differences and freedoms.

For more information on the Sustainable Child Friendly Municipality Initiative visit their Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/scfm.belize/ or http://bytdevelopment.com/childfriendlycities/what-is-the-child-friendly-cities-initiative/
Young, gifted and beautiful, this stellar dancer loses herself in the rhythm of the music. She forgets, if only for the moment, the trauma that occasionally jars at her even as she tries to attain her life goal of becoming like Oprah. She has dreams of helping children and offering support she never experienced. To protect her identity, we will call her Dancing Daisy. Her heart-wrenching story is one of rejection dating back to her first placement with a foster home in Belize City. Her rights as a child to be free from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have been denied repeatedly.

“My mom is not dead, but it’s just like I don’t have a mom!” Dancing Daisy lamented. She says that nothing can make her love her mom, who once claimed Daisy was demon-possessed and wanted to injure her with a machete. Today, Dancing Daisy has no relationship with her biological parents. Her dad had disowned her at birth, and a rift between her parents over her paternity led to a family breakdown that resulted in her ending up in the foster care system, where she has remained for most of her life.

Hardships confronted her during her years at the foster homes as well as at those times when she had returned to live with her family. Even so, she wants to take the lessons learned from all those experiences to help other children like her. Her dreams are ambitious. Dancing Daisy speaks of becoming an athlete, model and comedian, but also dreams of being like Oprah. Strong mentorship is key to giving Dancing Daisy a real chance at life, as she strives build resiliency. For the past 3 years, she has had a mentor who understands her plight and recognizes her special qualities. The mentor sees this promising youth as self-sufficient, very street savvy, intelligent and expressive. She believes that since Dancing Daisy has lived through the Department of Human Services’ programs she could be a key resource in shaping the changes necessary to strengthen the Department’s ability to cater to the needs of children like her.

Miraculously though it is, Dancing Daisy remains undefined by her painful past. She is today an advocate for change in the community where she lives, works and attends online school. She holds parents and political leaders accountable for the plight of marginalized youth, who sometimes end up falling into a life of crime. She emphasizes that leaders need to create jobs for those who are willing to work.

“I was supposed to have been dead by now,” she said, recounting her narrow escapes from danger, including a fire at the Youth Hostel. Unhappy with the cards life has dealt her, Dancing Daisy is taking the lemons that have soured her childhood experiences and turning them into lemonade. As she tries to identify that path that will take her to realizing her dreams, this visionary youth works in the food industry, helping to prepare local fast food, such as ‘garnaches’ – fried corn tortillas topped with beans, cheese and vegetables – for sale. When she is not working, she enjoys hobbies such as basketball.

Dancing Daisy is one of the youths who has participated in the Children Advisory Body under the Sustainable Child Friend Municipalities initiative. The Sustainable Child-Friendly Municipalities Initiative – supported by UNICEF and UNDP in partnership with the Government of Belize – was launched back in 2014 to make cities and towns across Belize safer for children. It provides a platform for children like Dancing Daisy to participate in decision-making processes that will help drive child-centred change and promote child protection programs that keep youth at the heart of their mission. It is the first initiative of its kind in Belize to allow children to participate in decision-making on sustainable child-friendly policies and related programs to address their needs and concerns.
NEW LEADERSHIP FOR UNICEF - INTRODUCING THE NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

On January 1st, 2018, UNICEF welcomed its 7th Executive Director Ms. Henrietta Fore brings to the role more than four decades of private and public sector leadership experience.

“I am honored to be joining such a remarkable organization, which I have known and admired for many years, and look forward to continuing UNICEF’s work to help save children’s lives, fight for their rights and help them realize their potential,” Ms. Fore said.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed Ms. Fore as UNICEF Executive Director after consultation with UNICEF’s governing board. Prior to taking up this appointment, Ms. Fore served as Chair of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Holsman International, a manufacturing and investment company. From 2007 to 2009, Ms. Fore, an American national, served as both the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and as Director of United States Foreign Assistance in the U.S. State Department. From 2005 to 2007, Ms. Fore was Under Secretary of State for Management, the Chief Operating Officer for the U.S. Department of State. Prior to that, she was the 37th Director of the United States Mint, a position she held from 2001 to 2005. Earlier in her career, at USAID, she was appointed as Assistant Administrator for Asia and Assistant Administrator for Private Enterprise (1989-1993). She also served on the Boards of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

In addition to her Government service, Ms. Fore has had leadership roles in a number of organizations in civil society, including being Global Co-Chair of the Asia Society, and associations with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Aspen Institute, the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, and the Center for Global Development. She has also had leadership roles in the corporate sector, serving on the boards of a number of U.S. and international public corporations, and being active in promoting best practices in the corporate sector – including as Co-Chair of Women Corporate Directors.

Ms. Fore has a Bachelor of Arts in History from Wellesley College and a Master of Science in Public Administration from the University of Northern Colorado. She is married and has four children. Ms. Henrietta Fore succeeds Mr. Anthony Lake who left office on 31st December, 2017 after serving UNICEF for seven years in that post.
A new medical laboratory for Southern Regional Hospital – meeting the medical needs of 75,000

Any day at the Southern Regional Hospital is a busy day… narrow hallways teeming with people… men, women and children. On this day, it was especially busy as a team of international doctors and medical officers were visiting offering services to the people. That is normal for Belize. For a country with limited financial resources and often challenged human resources, these partnerships with international hospitals and medical officers are most welcomed. The value of the services our public health facilities can never be overstated. In this instance, considering the southern regional medical facility supports two districts with a population of 75,000 people, many migrant, mobile, indigenous and highly vulnerable. The hallways teeming with people was matched by the excitement of the administrative and laboratory teams. Excitement because the modifications and renovations for a new laboratory were taking shape and it was literally just a matter of weeks before the team of five professionals would be able to relocate to the newly refurbished and outfitted facility. We greeted our hosts as they welcomed us to join them on a tour of the new space under renovation. Michel Guinand, UNICEF’s Social Protection Specialist is new to Belize and this was his first trip to the area, seeing the work being executed by UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and with the valuable funding from the PROBITAS Foundation of Spain.

Henrietta Fore succeeds Mr. Anthony Lake who left office on 31st December, 2017 after serving UNICEF for seven years in that post. “This was our conference room,” stated the Hospital Administrator Nerissi Castro. Ms. Castro is the Administrator of the adjoining Dangriga PolyClinic and now as well of the Southern Regional Hospital. She explains that the relocation of the laboratory was necessary as the current space is tight and cramped. She along with the Chief of Staff for the Hospital Dr. Aimee Hunter explained the renovations being done will accommodate the office space for the Supervisor of the Laboratory, improve the spacing and flow for the efficient management of the laboratory services, house the current and newly acquired lab machines but also critically upgrade the air conditioning cooling system for the laboratory.

“In the current laboratory, some machines must be turned off, so they do not overheat,” explained Dr. Hunter an explanation supported by Laboratory Supervisor Ms. Desiree Joseph. It was explained that while the project does not fund the air-conditioning system, the procurement with national counterpart funds sees to the preservation of the equipment and the conditions necessary for laboratory services. A 19-year veteran, although short in stature, Ms. Joseph has been the giant at the helm of the small team of professionals and the hospital’s laboratory. “When I first arrived, what you see here was the best thing ever, but we have grown, our population in the area has grown, the variety of services from the lab has grown. Our space is no longer adequate.”

Five professionals that include three lab technicians, herself as the Supervisor who also serves as the Parasitologist, and one Phlebotomist who doubles as a Microscopist, comprise the small staff that offer diagnostic services in this government facility serving the 75,000 people of the entire southern Belize. Ms. Joseph spoke with such pride; pride that she makes no apologies for insisting that each of her staff displays. It is apparent she has been able to shepherd the team well. That pride was clearly observed as the technicians
extended service to the people. The Phlebotomist Ms. Olympia Ramclam was preparing a patient for a blood donation. She worked quietly but diligently putting her patient at ease as she prepared to draw blood.

The patient, Mr. Lindy Cadle had traveled the two and a half hours from deeper in the south – Independence Village to make this blood donation. "It is a good thing we have this hospital," he said. "I am here to help my aunt who is to have a surgery." His aunt is a senior citizen who had been admitted to the hospital earlier in the week and awaiting her surgery. The blood donation was being made in the event she needed such.

The medical services in Independence Village are met by a PolyClinic that is equipped only with a general practitioner, who must serve all patients no matter the illness. Surgeries can’t be accommodated at that facility. Clients in need of that specialized care must travel to the regional hospital. This means any visiting family member or person acting as a blood donor to support that specific surgery must also travel to the Southern Regional Hospital’s laboratory to be able to make the extraction.

As I spoke with her staff and client, Ms. Joseph observed. I turned to her and asked if the cramped space, work load and high expectation are not too much stress. She responded with enthusiasm, “No! What we do is of great value to our people. I encourage my staff that we must be ready to serve all the time. We must love what we do and be happy to do our work, doing it with professionalism, insisting on quality all the time.”

She looked at me and explained that as a Supervisor she spends very little time in an office behind a desk, but believes in pitching in, helping with the work. She is particularly detailed with her supervision and evaluations of staff, explaining that she conducts written and practical tests for her staff. Ms. Joseph insisted that even as their formal education is complete, she and her staff must stay informed; must keep reading and researching; ensuring that they are aware of the latest development and information in each of the specific technical areas and their training must be ongoing.

Recently, the data from the laboratory through its parasitology studies and testing led by Ms. Joseph established that there was a parasite infection problem for children in the area. "This data supported the work of the national Maternal and Child Health Unit in the Ministry of Health. Because we were able to provide the evidence to demonstrate this problem, the Maternal and Child Health Unit conducted de-worming programs across the primary schools in the entire area," she said, most proud of the impact this has had on children’s health.

Her closing words are as impactful as her work.

“This is not just a job... it is an opportunity to educate. Our work is valuable to the overall health of our community.”
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE:

MAKING THE LAW ACCESSIBLE AND WORK FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE...

LIVING WITHOUT KNOWING YOUR RIGHTS IS LIKE LIVING WITHOUT FREEDOM...
ADAPTED FROM JOSEPH RATZINGER (POPE BENEDICT XVI FROM HIS BOOK SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY)

“It has been a great experience in being able to assist people who otherwise would not have been able to obtain legal advice, either due to finance or geography,”

-says attorney Ms. Baja Shoman who has been at the Legal Advice and Service Center for almost six years.

The nationwide free legal clinics commenced in August 2017 and have traveled from the deep south of the country to the west and now the north, setting up shop in vulnerable communities offering services to people who, as Ms. Shoman said, are ill able to afford such services with are often far-removed from their homes and available only in urban centers. The services include advice on family matters and child custody, divorce and alimony and child maintenance issues, civil matters having to do with labour, or criminal matters of immigration and even issues where children have come in conflict with the law.

Belize has a Legal Advice and Service Center with a staff of four attorneys (all resident in Belize City) who offer services at a subsidized rate. Such services exist only in Belize City, Belmopan and Orange Walk. The Legal Aid Center was opened in 1981 in Belize City to serve the legal needs of the poor. The Center provides legal advice, assistance, referral and representation geared towards low-income persons. The type of service provided by the center depends largely on the type of legal problems facing the individual client. In general, case support is provided around family, land, civil and estate matters.

Others are referred to an agency or service which can more appropriately resolve their immediate crisis or long-term problems. The Legal Aid Center was initially funded by international partnerships with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Caribbean Justice Improvement Project (CJIP), the Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO), and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Today, the Center is funded completely by the Belize Bar Association.

The idea of the traveling legal clinics was born out of the collaboration that UNICEF has with the Belize Supreme Court and aims to improve the institutional framework for legal services, with the goal of making legal assistance more accessible and the Court system more responsive to the most vulnerable. This specific initiative of free legal clinics is made possible through a funding from the European Union for a project entitled, “Creating an Enabling Environment for the Protection of Children from Violence and Abuse”.

“The free legal clinic was a special request from the Chief Justice His Lordship Kenneth Benjamin,” said Child Protection Officer Michelle Segura. “The idea is to offer some relief where a huge gap has been realized. People need access to legal advice and not being able to afford the services of an attorney leaves them most vulnerable and at a huge disadvantage.”

When asked about the observations as they met with the people, the attorneys remarked that people need help with information as basic as what services are available for them at the different government departments and agencies to as complex as needing a lawyer to stand up for them in court. “Most noticeable is that persons do not know their rights,” remarked Ms. Baja Shoman. “The legislations are written in a manner not easily understood and it is clear that there must be a program to build their awareness through a simplified and easily understood format.”
It has been seven months since the traveling free legal clinics commenced and most of the instances have been simple cases, which could have been easily disposed of had people known their rights or able to afford and have access to legal advice in their immediate community. This is especially important for the far-flung communities in the South. And Ms. Shoman says, “One possible solution may be to informing the village Alcaldes in the Mayan communities who play a valuable leadership role or in other cases village elders and community leaders. We recognize we need to be careful as we do not want them giving legal advice and for the advice given not be accurate, but the basic information as to people’s rights and which government departments and agencies can assist them in resolving challenges is essential.” Having returned to Belize almost six years following her legal training, Ms. Shoman signed up to work for the Centre, providing free legal services. She was reflective as she responded to examples of cases that were most impactful to her as a legal professional. She spoke of a case where she had helped a mother successfully register her baby as a first step in regaining custody of her child.

She also shared about cases involved support through representation and advocacy to help families access and navigate the justice system to ensure protection of their children. The lessons from the free legal clinics are clear. Our vulnerable families and children need the valuable assistance of persons knowledgeable of rights and the laws. “Clearly the traveling free legal clinics are a good thing. There is need for the clinics to occur more often - at least once a year,” says Ms. Shoman. Even as she admits that, a concern remains, that of the availability of financial and human resources to ensure the continuity of the initiative. Despite the limitations of resources, she closes by saying, “We have been able to feel gratified in educating citizens of the country. It allows us to understand the needs for the legal services in far flung communities in the country and for our people who most need it.”
U-Report is a tool that maintains anonymity, confidentiality and credibility with adolescents, while receiving their views and recommendations on critical social issues. It is operated by NGOs, CSOs, youth organizations and UN agencies. In 2017, Belize hosted a one-day workshop on U-Report targeting main stakeholders and youths from the different municipalities. The workshop highlighted both the benefits of the platform as well as potential challenges it would face in Belize. Most valuable is that issues in Belize, such as Access to Justice, Adolescent health, Child Friendly Municipalities and Emergencies can be discussed through engaging youths on the U-Report platform, with a view to generate aggregated data useful to design policies. As a next step, UNICEF developed key national partnerships with the National Committee for Families and children (NCFC), Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation, Digicell and SMART (key telecommunications providers) the Sustainable Child Friendly Municipality Initiative of the Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development. As well, a contract is ongoing with Ilhasoft (a technical team in Brazil). Mellissa Rivero is the identified U-Report Belize consultant leading the development and launch of U-Report Belize.

Over the years, there have been growing concerns among government and non-governmental organizations (NGO) on addressing the varied social issues and challenges facing children, adolescents and the country. The need for quality, disaggregated, regularly collected data has been mentioned in all national strategic planning documents. U-Report Belize is a credible response by UNICEF and its partners ideal for engaging the young persons and fielding the information and data needed to inform policy making and programme determination. U-Report Belize will see the implementation of a social media-based application that will allow Belizeans (youth) to timely communicate, share information and opinions non-exclusive but intended to empower young people. The official launch of the tool is expected for July this year.
Later this year, UNICEF will be hosting technical officers from the Eastern Caribbean Area (ECA) representing Anguilla, Barbados, Grenada, Antigua and Nevis. The south-south collaboration with the UNICEF Barbados Country Office will support the region in rolling out of Care for Child Development (CCD) within their own country programmes. Representatives from CARICOM, PAHO/WHO and the OECS are slated to join the delegation. This collaboration builds on initiatives commenced in May 2017 with a regional training for CCD, a parent intervention programme for Early Childhood Development (ECD) trainers from the three different government ministries for health, education and human development.

Denise Robateau, UNICEF ECD and Education Specialist in Belize is working with Shelly-Ann Harper - ECD Specialist in UNICEF Barbados to prepare for this south-south exchange. Shelly-Ann Harper has shared that the ECA is working to strengthen the ECD programme in communities for the most vulnerable in the Eastern Caribbean. The goal now is to roll out this programme within our own programmes, even in times of emergencies. The focus of this south-south collaboration will be for the delegates to view the best practices of the ECD multi-sectoral strategy in Belize, with a focus on capacity building in two new areas in Care for Child Development. New areas now included are on violence prevention and supporting families exposed to the Zika virus and other disabilities. The participants will have the opportunity to learn from parenting programmes in Belize, where CCD is integrated.