Protecting children in violent conflict and natural disasters is life-saving. As the number, scale and complexity of humanitarian emergencies steadily grows, millions of children, along with their families and communities, suffer numerous, multifaceted forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. At the same time parties to conflict increasingly disrespect international law and target aid workers with both physical and political attacks. Child protection in humanitarian action (CPHA) is essential to protecting girls and boys of all ages from violence and helping children and their caregivers to recover from displacement, armed conflict and natural disasters.

In the chaos of crisis, children are often forced to flee their homes and many lose or are separated from their parents or caregivers. Girls and boys are recruited and used by armed forces, and increasingly, are injured or killed by explosive weapons and mines. The threat of gender-based violence increases in all emergencies, particularly affecting women and girls. Meanwhile, children and families must also cope with deteriorating living conditions, limited access to education, healthcare and other basic services, and disruption in their usual social support networks; all of which negatively affect children and caregivers’ well-being and their ability to recover from adversity. With many humanitarian situations lasting a decade or more, millions of girls and boys are growing up under harsh conditions, compromising their protection, development, and future.

UNICEF is a global leader in child protection in humanitarian action, offering technical leadership for the sector and providing critical programming for girls and boys at risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

Nearly one in four children lives in countries affected by humanitarian crises.

The average humanitarian crisis now lasts nine years, with many children growing up under harsh and unstable conditions.¹

Over 34 million children living through conflict and disaster lack access to child protection services.²
All children have the right to grow up with their families and are generally safer and better cared for in family environments, underscoring the importance of keeping families together.

particularly for women and girls. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a flagrant example of disregard for IHL. In 2017, landmines and explosive remnants of war alone killed or injured nearly 2,500 children, the highest number of child casualties in more than 20 years. Parties to conflict increasingly place restrictions on humanitarian access, limiting the ability of aid organizations to reach vulnerable children and communities. Armed groups abduct children nationally and transnationally, recruit and use them on front lines and in support roles. These trends combined with complex security environments resulted in repeat displacement, prolonged family separation, arbitrary and illegal detention of children, and expose them to further abuse and exploitation. These trends combined with complex security environments have resulted in multiple displacements, prolonged family separations and increased children’s vulnerability to further abuse and exploitation.

Strained capacity of national systems limits governments’ ability to prepare for and respond to humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian situations frequently occur in developing or fragile states, where national systems for the care and protection of children and families are often under-resourced. Faced with an influx of refugees, significant internal displacement, and a natural disaster damaging infrastructure, child protection systems and related social services are often unable to cope with the increasing, complex needs of children and communities.

UNICEF’s Approach

UNICEF’s child protection in humanitarian action programs aim to ensure every child is protected from violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect. We partner with governments, international organizations, and civil society to actively prevent children from being harmed; to monitor grave violations committed against girls and boys and advocate for respect for international humanitarian law; and to develop programmes to support children who have experienced violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. UNICEF’s child protection work promotes effective linkages between humanitarian and development programmes and supports countries to strengthen their capacities and systems for mitigating risks, preparing for and responding to emergencies, and building resilience. UNICEF also leads the development of technical standards, guidance and advocacy efforts to support child protection actors in the field in delivering evidence-based, effective and high-quality programs to protect children.

UNICEF works with children, families and communities to prevent and address a wide range of child protection issues in humanitarian settings. Priority programme areas are described in the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, and include:

- Providing leadership and coordination to the sector by leading the Child Protection Area of Responsibility, co-leading the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and working across sectors to develop integrated programming to address root causes of violence and exploitation.
- Strengthening child protection systems to prevent and respond to abuse and exploitation in humanitarian situations, including by supporting families, equipping community-based groups to monitor child protection concerns and strengthening the social service workforce and case management services.
- Monitoring and reporting grave violations of children’s rights in situations of armed conflict. UNICEF documents incidents to call for action to ensure the protection of children. By engaging with armed actors, UNICEF advocates for children to be treated first and foremost as victims by all parties to conflict, for their protection and the delivery of emergency assistance.
- Releasing and reintegrating children associated with armed forces and armed groups by working in partnership with governments and other stakeholders to prevent child recruitment, to release recruited children, and to ensure all associated girls and boys receive holistic, community-based reintegration services.
- Preventing and responding to family separation, including by providing family-based care for all unaccompanied and separated children and reunifying separated children with their families quickly and safely, wherever possible.
- Addressing gender-based violence by ensuring quality, multi-sectoral response services are accessible for all survivors of gender-based violence and improving the safety and resilience of women and girls, including by identifying and mitigating GBV risks across all sectors.
- Promoting mental health and psychosocial support, by providing community-led, multi-layered services focused on mobilizing family, social, and community support and strengthening MINPS systems.
- Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). UNICEF Executive Director led efforts of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on PSEA during 2018-2019 and invested $11 million of internal funds to strengthen reporting and response mechanisms in 18 humanitarian situations.

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Supporting mine action by leading technical guidance and programming on explosive ordnance risk education, prioritizes victim assistance, and advocates for ratification and/or compliance with international humanitarian law.

Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). UNICEF Executive Director led efforts of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on PSEA during 2018-2019 and invested $11 million of internal funds to strengthen reporting and response mechanisms in 18 humanitarian situations.

Challenges

Violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect of children increase in humanitarian situations, while the normative protective systems and social supports for children and families weaken. In conflict, children are also exposed to grave violations of their rights, including recruitment and use by armed forces, armed groups, sexual violence, and attacks on schools and hospitals. Children’s experience of violence differs depending on the type of emergency, their age and gender, and family circumstances. Whether the perpetrators of violence are strangers or family, such violence and abuse can have lasting consequences on a child’s development and wellbeing that persist long after the acute emergency has passed. Preventing and helping children to cope with the effects of these experiences requires coordinated services and responses. Children and their families need emergency assistance and longer-term support to recover.

Family separation undermines the health and development of children, exposes them to greater risk of violence, exploitation and abuse, and can cause severe distress. All children have the right to grow up with their families and are generally safer and better cared for in family environments, underscoring the importance of keeping families together. Yet in many humanitarian situations, children are separated from their families, in the chaos of displacement, by parties to conflict, or by the pressures of survival.

Increasing disregard for international law amongst parties to conflict has become common, with dire consequences for children. Armed conflict can trigger sexual violence and forced marriage.

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