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Protecting Children in Emergencies:
A Comprehensive Evaluation of UNICEF Programmes

When an emergency strikes, whether a natural disaster or armed conflict, children require special protection to ensure their safety and well-being. UNICEF works to prevent children from being harmed, to monitor violations committed against them and to respond when children have been subjected to violence, exploitation or abuse. In December 2013, UNICEF published its first comprehensive evaluation assessing how well its global and country strategies and programmes have worked to protect children in emergencies.

UNICEF's global mandate specifically calls for it to focus on protecting children from the immediate and long-term effects of emergencies. Girls and boys face grave threats during emergencies – of becoming victims of sexual violence, of being separated from their families, of suffering extreme stress and in some cases of being killed.

Together with its partners, UNICEF plays a lead role in reuniting separated children with their families; providing psychosocial support; reintegrating children associated with armed forces/armed groups; monitoring violations of children's rights and advocating for realization of rights; preventing and responding to gender-based violence; providing mine risk education; and supporting governments through system-strengthening and capacity-building initiatives. Over the last decade, UNICEF's responsibilities have grown significantly, including in

coordination and leadership through the humanitarian cluster system and in monitoring and reporting on grave protection violations, consistent with United Nations Security Council resolutions.

The 'Evaluation of UNICEF Programmes to Protect Children in Emergencies' was undertaken to identify key successes and gaps in child protection programming over the period 2009-2012 and to draw out lessons learned ahead of the roll-out of the new Strategic Plan, 2014-2017. The evaluation investigates achievements and gaps against the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs), UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy and the previous Strategic Plan, 2006-2013. It assesses the extent to which interventions in longer term child protection systems-strengthening and preparedness have led to a more effective response in crises.

For more information, visit www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_CPiE.html

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The evaluation included in-depth assessments in four countries (Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and South Sudan) and a detailed desk review of eight further country cases. An innovative element of the evaluation methodology was the participation of affected children and their caregivers in data collection and triangulation of findings.

The CPiE strategy was responsive to needs but programme design had weaknesses

The evaluation found that the global Child Protection Strategy was comprehensive and responded well to country-level needs, including those expressed by children themselves (see table 1). However, alignment between the Strategy and the CCCs was found to be poor. As a result, programme design and results-based programming at country level were found to be weak.

The evaluation found mixed results regarding the effectiveness of CPiE programming

Achievements were strongest in the realms of reintegration of separated children, psychosocial interventions and mine risk education. Evidence showed that identification of separated children was effective in fast-onset contexts (70-100 per cent coverage) but less effective in situations of protracted conflict (31-58 per cent). UNICEF-supported psychosocial interventions were found to have a wide reach, often exceeding the targets country offices had set for themselves (84-297 per cent). An estimated 8-13 per cent of the total population of affected children benefited from UNICEF's psychosocial support.

Mine risk education was found to reach high percentages of targeted populations (76-124 per cent). The evaluation found that it resulted in greater awareness, behaviour modification and in some cases increased sightings and reporting of potential risks.

'PLaCES' in Pakistan: Integrated programming led by child protection staff

At community level in Pakistan UNICEF has established a model of protective spaces known as Protective Learning and Community Emergency Services (PLaCES) that bring girls and boys (with a specific focus on adolescents) and women into a protective structure. These offer age- and gender-specific services, train community-based child protection committees and link to governmental child protection units. The emphasis of PLaCES is on protecting girls, boys and women from risks and enhancing their health and well-being. The model has been shown to be appropriate for populations affected by complex emergencies as well as natural disasters, with some differences in the emphasis of services.

UNICEF programming was also found to be effective in some countries in responding to gender-based violence and in preventing harmful practices, especially at the field level. Safe houses and multisectoral interventions were effective in several countries. Key gaps included low field presence and burdensome administrative procedures for reporting and release of funding.

Results were weakest for preventing violence against children and for monitoring and reporting. Efforts to prevent violence, especially physical violence, were sporadic, and boys and men in particular were not effectively engaged. The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict provided verified data in eight concerned countries. However, reporting on violations other than recruitment was found to be sparse and of limited quality due to significant underreporting, understaffing, weak partner capacity and lack of resources. In addition, the evaluation noted lack of long-term follow-up of beneficiaries, especially for reunification and reintegration programmes.

Table 1: Protection risks identified by adolescents in Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and South Sudan
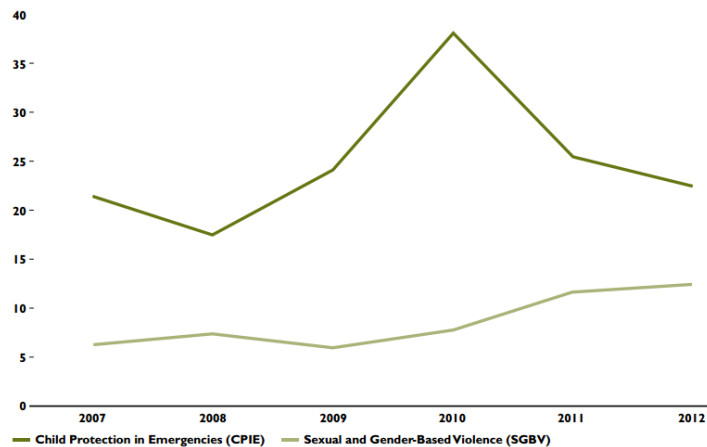
CONFLICT SETTINGS		DISASTER SETTINGS	
GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS
Armed combat, landmines	Armed combat, landmines	Damage to homes and livelihoods	Damage to homes and livelihoods
Psychological distress	Lack of access to food and medical services	Gender-based violence (kidnapping, rape, forced marriage)	Kidnapping
Sexual violence	Climate of insecurity and lawlessness	Insecurity, violence, theft	Insecurity, violence, theft
Lack of access to food and medical services	Closure of or damage to schools	Separation from families	Accidents
Separation from families	Child labour	Drowning	Drugs

Note: Findings are from focus groups involving adolescents aged 12 to 17 years (259 girls and 218 boys)

Despite resource constraints, programming was mostly equitable

In some countries, results were compromised in terms of programme effectiveness and efficiency due to a shortage of human and financial resources, indicative of the volatile funding situation for CPiE overall, which also affects UNICEF (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Total funding for CPiE (UNICEF and other actors), 2007-12 ($ million)

Source: Save the Children (2013). Unspeakable Crimes against Children-Sexual Violence in Conflict, p. 31; based on analysis of OCHA Financial Tracking Service data.

Nevertheless, programming was found to generally reach those most in need: Geographical areas with high concentrations of vulnerable children were identified in all countries, and access to services was found to be equitable in terms of age and sex. There were, however, few programmes targeting children with disabilities.

System-strengthening is progressing but social change programming is often left out

UNICEF made considerable investments in longer term strengthening of state systems for child protection across all dimensions at central and decentralized levels in all 12 countries covered in the evaluation. This included investments in protective legislation and policies, service delivery mechanisms and human resource capacity. Community-based child protection structures have been established across all the countries, usually linked to a protective space or state service. Another successful element of system-strengthening was development of preparedness standards for CPiE, which were adopted by governments in most settings. In addition were a number of high-quality capacity-building initiatives reaching a wide range of partners.

The evaluation found significant room for improvement regarding application of a systems approach in conflict-affected and fragile states and incorporation of social change/social norms approaches into preparedness planning. Integrated planning and intersectoral or inter-cluster linkages were also limited, especially in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector.

While UNICEF provided effective leadership, advocacy was identified as a gap

Evidence showed that the organization is highly valued by partners for inter-agency coordination and quality technical leadership. In 10 of the 12 countries examined by the evaluation, UNICEF was the coordinating agency for child protection in emergencies, producing good results. In addition, it made technical contributions to joint efforts on gender-based violence and mental health/psychosocial support where formal coordination mechanisms were largely absent. UNICEF was also the provider of last resort in some countries, focusing on hard-to-reach areas.

Lessons learned on effective approaches in child protection in emergencies

1. Preventing violence against children and women: Low-cost methods to prevent violence and challenge impunity have not yet been used extensively but have shown promise, especially in refugee camps. They include providing whistles to children and women, providing women with dignity kits, training women as unarmed civilian peacekeepers and gender-based violence monitors, and using SMS messaging to encourage reporting of gender-based violence.

2. Preventing recruitment and re-recruitment: The most effective approaches were providing technical support inside child protection units; ensuring that children have birth registration documents and formal release papers, allowing them to prove their age; providing livelihoods interventions to released children; and including other vulnerable children in reintegration programming.

3. Increasing coverage of psychosocial interventions: Mobile outreach allows services to be brought to isolated communities, where they can reach underserved groups including religious minorities.

4. Preventing risk from landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW): Three aspects stood out as highly effective: Establishing mechanisms to report sightings of mines/ERW as part of the education process; addressing mine/ERW risk education in community meetings led by local leaders; and using mine/ERW risk education as an entry point to discuss peacebuilding.

Advocacy was found to be strongest on issues concerning child recruitment and when undertaken in conjunction with other UN agencies or the Humanitarian Coordinator. Only half the country offices said they had a CPiE advocacy strategy on any issue. Many noted that more advocacy support from regional offices and headquarters was needed, including through speaking out at global level.

The way forward

UNICEF's efforts to protect children in emergencies are at a turning point. While the organization and its partners are poised to capitalize on and sustain recent gains for children and their families, CPiE programming lacks well-documented evidence and is inadequately funded and short-staffed. Evidence has shown that strong child protection systems are an important component of emergency preparedness and response and can mitigate the impact of emergencies on children and their families. In addition, emergencies provide an important entry point to strengthen child protection systems and address attitudes and behaviours that impede recovery.

Within UNICEF, the evaluation results have reinforced and sparked efforts to:

- improve referral and case management for delivery of services to the most vulnerable children in emergencies;
- integrate child protection in programming for resilience and peace-building in fragile and conflict-affected states;
- develop programme strategies for emergency response to strengthen systems for child protection, including for early recovery and preparedness and for more sustainable results;
- develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to inform advocacy and programme response in areas such as mental health and psychosocial support and gender-based violence in emergencies;
- build the capacity of UNICEF and partners for deployment in child protection humanitarian response.

Key recommendations to UNICEF and its partners

- ✔ Further develop inter-agency human rights-based advocacy in all contexts and expand engagement with the rule-of-law and security sector agendas.
- ✔ Strengthen the prevention of violence, including gender-based violence, using social change interventions and community alert systems.
- ✔ Strengthen management and use of data for advocacy, accountability and learning.
- ✔ Raise funding for CPiE by providing evidence of results and emphasizing the need for prevention.
- ✔ Analyse the application of the Child Protection Strategy in fragile and conflict-affected states and harmonize the CCCs with the strategy.
- ✔ Strengthen the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- ✔ Together with international NGO partners, invest in capacity-building of governments and national NGOs.