

background

Report # 107

Worldwide Child Protection System

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Protecting The Children Of The World

UNICEF makes an ambitious attempt to create global protection system

There is more than enough data and stories of heartbreak and horror to make a convincing case that an effective child protection system embraced by all nations of the world would have a humanitarian benefit. Statistics such as 218 million children forced into child labor, 1.2 million children trafficked each year and 143 million orphans worldwide only begin to tell the story.

The questions that occupied UNICEF officials gathered in Bucharest, Romania last summer was whether such a system could be designed and, if so, what would it look like? To American observers, the scope and complexity of such a task seemed overwhelming.

“When you got these people together, they started talking about the circumstances, the religious beliefs, the cultural differences that exist. There were people who had just come back from Myanmar and dealt with that natural disaster [Cyclone Nargis]. And the man-made disasters – armed conflict, civil wars, genocide – going on. This looked like a totally impossible task,” said Robert B. McCall, PhD., co-director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

UNICEF’s new Child Protection Strategy is a key part of its efforts to create a protective environment for children in nations large and small. The Bucharest workshop was held to allow UNICEF regional directors from around the world to work on the basics, such as defining a minimum package of services, the capacities and competencies those services would require and the outcomes a global child protection system could be expected to produce.

OCD Co-Directors Dr. McCall and Christina J. Groark, PhD, were in Bucharest to prepare documents related to the workshop and future work that will be necessary. Despite initial doubts, they came to believe that a global child protection system is not beyond the reach of UNICEF and the international community. But it won’t be easy or quick. The range of international child protection issues alone is striking.

“Their view of child protection is much different than our view of child abuse and neglect here in the United States,” said Dr. Groark.

Brief summaries of these issues underscore that point.

Birth Registration

About 51 million births are unregistered every year in developing nations. Most are from poor, marginalized, or displaced families in nations where registration is dysfunctional or doesn’t exist at all. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 66% of

Child marriage, widespread use of child labor, armed conflicts, discrimination, weak child registration systems, lucrative child trafficking market and millions of orphans worldwide are among the issues that makes an international child protection system a necessary but challenging endeavor.

children under the age of 5 are unregistered. Registration improves access to health care, immunizations and schools, and helps prevent such things as child labor and underage military conscription.

Child Labor

Of the estimated 218 million children aged 5-17 who are forced into child labor throughout the world, some 126 million are believed to be doing hazardous work, such as working in mines and working with chemicals, pesticides and dangerous machinery.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the child labor force stands at an estimated 69 million – about one in three children in that region. In South Asia, the child labor force is estimated to be about 44 million children.

Child Marriage

Child marriage can have serious consequences for children. Abuse is common, girls tend not to go to school once

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they are married, they are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, and the risk of premature pregnancies is higher, resulting in higher rates of maternal and infant mortality. An estimated 60 million women in developing countries were married before the age of 18.

Child Trafficking

Child trafficking is a lucrative black market trade and the demand for children as cheap labor or for sexual exploitation is high. UNICEF estimates that as many as 1.2 million children are trafficked every year and face disease, violence, sexual abuse and other dangers. In the Mekong region of Southeast Asia, surveys suggest that 30% to 35% of all sex workers are children.

Children In Conflicts

Armed conflicts often exact a heavy toll on the most vulnerable, including children. Their suffering during armed conflict is seen in many ways. Children represent about half of civilian casualties. More than 2 million children are estimated to have died as a direct result of armed conflicts since 1990. More than 1 million have been left orphaned or separated from families.

Discrimination

Millions of children are subject to discrimination of many kinds. Gender-based infanticide, abortion, malnutrition and neglect, for example, are believed to be the reason an estimated 100 million women are "missing" from the world's population. UNICEF estimates that only 2 percent of the world's 150 million disabled children attend school.

Children Without Parental Care

Children without parents or guardians are at greater risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation, trafficking, discrimination and other abuses. They face a higher risk of developmental delays. UNICEF estimates

that 143 million children in the world are orphaned for many reasons. Armed conflict has left more than 1 million orphans since 1990. Orphans account for 2%-5% of the world's refugee population.

Violence Against Children

Violence against children is one of the most serious problems facing children today. Violence pervades societies and can find children in schools, orphanages, on the streets, in the workplace, in prisons and at home. The World Health Organization estimates that 40 million children under the age of 15 suffer abuse and neglect and need health and social care.

United States Not Immune

Although the scope of international child protection issues identified by UNICEF is broader than problems common in the United States, a universal system to address them does have implications for America.

A 1995 survey, for example, found that 5 percent of U.S. parents admitted to disciplining their children by violent means, including hitting with an object, kicking, beating and threatening with a knife or gun. And it is possible that with the arrival of immigrants from diverse nations, the United States will encounter some of the international child protection issues that today rarely, if ever, occur

within its borders, particularly those that stem from religious beliefs and cultural practices.

Designing A System

In addition to the wide range of child protection issues, an effective international system to address them also must consider a complex set of factors that includes difference among nations, governments, laws, cultures, and resources available to implement and monitor standards and services.

UNICEF officials last summer took some important steps toward shaping a global child protection system. They reached consensus on benchmark interventions that governments, non-government organizations and others should attempt to achieve in all nations. They identified basic elements, including services and interventions, legal frameworks, monitoring and referral systems and resources needed to support an effective protection system.

They also recognized that success depends on being able to identify, strengthen and link all of its underlying elements. "They saw that you have to cut across a variety of agencies and departments to get to child protection, but you can't ignore the infrastructures of the budget and the capacities of the country," said Dr. Groark.



references

For information about the child protection efforts of UNICEF visit the following website: www.unicef.org/protection/index_3717.html

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