



Five Reflections About UNICEF Advocacy for Children
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Introduction

For more than sixteen years it has been my honor to work with UNICEF teams across five continents to strengthen their advocacy work for children. These advocacy support projects have involved more than a thousand UNICEF staff, more than fifty UNICEF country offices and national committees, as well as most of the regional offices and most of the program areas at UNICEF headquarters.

Over time my role with UNICEF teams has evolved from being a trainer and strategist to becoming a sort of UNICEF advocacy therapist. I do a lot of listening, both in formal workshops and in hundreds of valuable side conversations. I guide people through a process that can help make their advocacy work more powerful. And along the way I have come to a set of useful insights about UNICEF's advocacy DNA.

This memo summarizes those insights into five reflections that I hope can help stimulate an even deeper conversation within UNICEF about how to lift up its advocacy voice in the most effective way possible. It also includes at the end a special resources section with links our most popular advocacy tools and a library of many of the advocacy materials that I have developed specifically for UNICEF.

UNICEF's voice for the world's children has never been more urgent. Again, it is an honor to be a part of that with you.

I. Advocacy is Ever More Central to UNICEF's Work – But Faces Challenges

Advocacy for children has been embedded in UNICEF's mission statement from the days of its founding. But in recent years it has become far more central to UNICEF's work at every level of the agency. This is true at the country office level in particular. In a different time UNICEF built wells to get children drinkable water. Now it works with governments to fulfil the right to water with government programs and projects.

The leveraging potential of UNICEF advocacy is profound. An example is the successful campaign by the Thailand country office to enact the country's first national child support grant. UNICEF's investment in its advocacy on the issue could probably be measured in tens of thousands of dollars. The value that it produced in financial support for the country's children is measured in the tens of millions of dollars, each year and for millions of Thai children. For reasons like this, strong advocacy is only going to become more central to UNICEF's work in the future.

That said, UNICEF also faces a set of important challenges as it undertakes its advocacy work. Some of those challenges are external, including the rise of authoritarian states and the closing of civil society in too many countries. How does UNICEF carry out its advocacy effectively in nations where even a Tweet can land a UN staff member in prison? [Note: See our guidance memo on this challenge in the resources section at the end of this memo.]

Other challenges are internal. For example, the majority of UNICEF program staff are hired for their expertise on key issues like child health or education. That expertise is an essential ingredient of UNICEF's work, but those are not the same skills as advocacy skills. Supporting UNICEF staff to develop their advocacy skills and capacities is going to continue to be an important priority.

II. UNICEF Advocacy Can Be More Effective by Being More Strategic

There is a tendency in UNICEF to approach advocacy from a tactical perspective. Offices produce reports, or put out news releases, or host forums, because it is what is familiar. That does not necessarily mean that these familiar tactical approaches to advocacy are the most effective. A strategic approach requires clear objectives, an honest assessment of where you are starting from, and a plan of action to get from one to the other. In UNICEF offices that have shifted to a more strategic approach, three ingredients are key:

1. Clear support from Leadership and a Whole-Office Approach

It is extremely important that the representative in each country office be clear with the rest of the team that advocacy is a priority and a part of everyone's job. And everyone in the office needs to understand that advocacy is indeed a part of their job, including program staff. Advocacy is often the most important tool for implementing program goals. Without that clarity from everyone, strong UNICEF advocacy does not happen.

2. A Core of People Who 'Get' Advocacy

In the offices where I have seen UNICEF advocacy function at its best, there is a small core group of staff who truly understand advocacy and keep watch over it. Often this is some mix of the communications team, the deputy representative, and others with an advocacy skill set. They know how to look for both hidden risks and unseen opportunities and help keep the advocacy work on track.

3. A Clear Strategic Plan

It is important that UNICEF advocacy efforts be guided by a clear and written strategic plan. This helps teams have a common understanding of the strategy that is developed and it provides an important tool for evaluating progress and refining strategy along the way. Our workshops are designed to develop that strategy with teams step by step. The Democracy Center has also developed a strategy planning template that allows UNICEF teams to capture this thinking and planning into a coherent document (included in the resources section at the end of this memo).

III. UNICEF Country Office Advocacy Takes Place at Three Different Levels

UNICEF advocacy for children at the country level really takes place at three different levels. Each is important but each very different:

1. The Technical Level

A good deal of UNICEF advocacy is conducted at a technical level between program experts in UNICEF and program planners in government – for example, discussions on how to design a vaccination campaign based on evidence of what is effective. These are not political conversations necessarily, but they do need to be treated as advocacy conversations. It is also worth noting that in times of deep political turbulence, staff at the technical level are sometimes the only ones who stay in their positions and those relationships provide an important source of continuity to UNICEF's relationship with government.

2. The Political Level

Conversations with ministers, deputy ministers and other high ranking officials is advocacy of a different kind. The persuasion required here is often not technical but deeply political. Why is it in the government's interest to do what UNICEF is asking for? What are the counter-arguments and UNICEF's response to them? Whomever carries out these conversations and relationships on behalf of UNICEF must be skilled in advocacy at a different level.

3. The Representative Level

There is also a high-level arena of advocacy that only the representative can carry out. When the Foreign Ministry calls, upset over something UNICEF has said in the press, only the representative can take that meeting, not a subordinate. Representatives across UNICEF have varied levels of skills in this area of advocacy. Many do it very well. Others require more support to develop these high-level political skills.

IV. UNICEF Advocacy on Climate Change: The New Challenge

It is welcome news that UNICEF has made action on the global climate crisis a serious institutional priority. It is hard to imagine any issue that will more define the futures of this

generation of children and that of future generations far beyond the horizon. AS many of you know, I have been encouraging UNICEF to do this for more than a decade. I was a UNICEF delegate to COP 20. It is especially encouraging to see Paloma Escudero taking leadership on this at a global level, bringing to it both her energy and wide experience.

Here are three important observations about UNICEF's new challenge of becoming a leader on climate change:

1. UNICEF Needs a Set of Different Models for Country-Level Action.

In all of the country and regional offices that I have worked with recently, climate change is now considered a top priority, but it is still unclear what that means. Not every country office is prepared to make climate a priority in the same way so it will be valuable to have a menu of options for climate action by UNICEF country teams.

At minimum, for example, county offices could prioritize helping lift up the voices of youth on the issue. This is both an important commitment for UNICEF and valuable strategically on the issue. The next level might be to generate country specific analysis about climate and children. The next after that would be to use that analysis to develop and support evidence-based policy and program work in each country on climate and children. Models like this or others can help country offices see more clearly the right entry point for that office.

2. UNICEF's Most Significant Power on Climate May Be Having Its Messages Echoed by Others.

It is important that UNICEF have a clear and strategic set of public-facing messages on climate and children that are consistent across the agency. It has begun to do that with its most recent reports. But the real potential power of UNICEF messaging on climate is having those core messages picked up and echoed by a wide range of high profile opinion leaders, at the global, regional, and country level.

People who speak out on climate – government leaders, organizational leaders, activists, writers, and others – will want to speak about children. Giving them UNICEF messages they can quote will empower them to do so, vastly amplifying UNICEF's voice. Doing this requires three things: the development of a short and clear set of UNICEF talking points on children and climate; identifying a set of key opinion leaders on the issue; approaching them one-by-one to get them UNICEF's messages and encouraging them to integrate those messages into their own public discourse.

3. Support and Connect Young People Working with UNICEF.

UNICEF's new commitment to climate change as an advocacy priority is drawing new young people into working directly for UNICEF or connecting with UNICEF as external allies. This is a very good development and I see it happening across regions. That said, UNICEF is often a very

difficult environment for young people. It is highly bureaucratic and careful – two qualities that don't dance well with the creative energy that young people bring with them.

One way to address this is to proactively connect and support a network of young people working with UNICEF (on all issues). There could be special programming aimed at young people, to solicit their insight, to increase their capacity and skills, and other actions that will build them up both individually and as a movement within UNICEF.

V. The Art of Strengthening UNICEF Advocacy

What does it actually take to support UNICEF staff and teams to become more effective advocates for children? I have watched this process for a very long time, with many UNICEF teams in many places. There is a 'secret sauce' to building up their power as advocates for children, one that seems consistent worldwide:

1. The Three Questions Planning Model

What works well with UNICEF teams in diverse political contexts is not a prescription for advocacy strategy but working through a set of three universal questions to drive strategy planning: *What do you want? What is the map of power you need to navigate to get it? What actions will you take?* Each of these, in turn has a set of sub-questions (covered here in our booklet, [The Art of Advocacy Strategy](#)). Giving people a straightforward and clear advocacy planning methodology makes a very big difference.

2. Training and Planning Go Together

Every workshop that I do with UNICEF is always a hybrid of both training and applied strategy planning. For learning to take place, the more applied it is the better. And planning exercises can also have a learning component built into them. We also commonly work on different advocacy issues side by side (nutrition, education, child protection, etc.) so that everyone sees the learnings of everyone else as well.

3. Make Full Use of Those Who Are Gifted at Advocacy

In every UNICEF office there is always a small group of people who really 'get' advocacy and understand how to carry it out in a strategic way. This could be the communications team, the representative or deputy representative, or someone else. It is important within an office to identify these people and be sure they have a leadership role on advocacy. It would also be very valuable for UNICEF to identify these people on a regional and global basis and look for ways to tap their skills and wisdom more broadly beyond the offices where they work.

RESOURCES

Over the course of my work with UNICEF these past sixteen years I have been called on to write a set of useful materials and resources to strengthen UNICEF advocacy, in addition to the

general resources developed by the Democracy Center for broader use. Below is a list of some of those resources that people have found most helpful. I have created a special section on the Democracy Center Web site just for the UNICEF resources so that you can access them in one place. [You can find that here.](#)

[GENERAL RESOURCES ON ADVOCACY FROM THE DEMOCRACY CENTER](#)

- [The Art of Advocacy Strategy: Our new and very user-friendly guide booklet.](#)
- [The Art of Advocacy Strategy On-Line Course: Self-directed and very solid.](#)

[ADVOCACY RESOURCES DEVELOPED SPECIFICALLY FOR UNICEF](#)

UNICEF Advocacy Planning Tools

- [The Art of UNICEF Advocacy Narrative](#)
- [Advocacy Strategy Planning Template](#)

UNICEF Advocacy Reports and Guidance Notes

- [Strengthening and Supporting UNICEF Advocacy for Children at the Country Level](#)
- [UNICEF Advocacy in Politically Sensitive Environments](#)
- [UNICEF Advocacy in Upper Middle and High Income Countries](#)
- [UNICEF Advocacy in Resource-Rich And Fragile Context Countries](#)

UNICEF Advocacy Case Studies

- [UNICEF Thailand's Successful Campaign for a Child Support Grant](#)
- [UNICEF Bulgaria's Successful Campaign to De-Institutionalize the National Childcare System](#)
- [UNICEF Paraguay's Successful Campaign To put Children at the Center of the National Agenda](#)

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