



Advocacy Guidance Note

UNICEF Advocacy in Politically Sensitive Environments

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Advocacy for children’s rights sits at the center of UNICEF’s core mission. It is also increasingly important as an implementing strategy for much of UNICEF’s programmatic work. How that advocacy is carried out varies a great deal from nation to nation based on the local political environment. In a number of countries, especially now in Latin America, the environment for advocacy has become more difficult.

In an increasing number of nations, governments have come to power that operate with an agenda based on nurturing division and polarization. They often question hard-won progress within societies in terms of rights, diversity and respect, including important matters of children’s rights. In addition, governments of this type also need enemies to blame as a means to divert public attention from other problems. For some, the UN with its multilateral agenda defending rights and diversity often appears to be the ‘ideal’ target.

Governments such as these have taken political aim at some fundamental pillars of child rights. They have become openly hostile to analysis and information that puts them in a bad light, including from UNICEF. These difficult contexts have also seen civil society allies come under attack, limitations on freedom of press, and other reversals of democratic norms that make UNICEF advocacy for children much more difficult. In the most extreme cases there are instances of UNICEF and other UN staff being directed to leave the country entirely.

This guidance note draws on the experience and learnings of UNICEF leaders at the country and regional level, including leadership and communications staff in Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, Colombia, Chile and Ecuador and the Latin America and Caribbean regional office. It lays out their collective wisdom in response to three central questions:

- 1. What are the situations that we are dealing with when we talk about a ‘politically sensitive’ environment?*
- 2. How do those political conditions impact children’s rights and UNICEF advocacy for children?*
- 3. What are some of the strategies that UNICEF teams have found effective to deal with those conditions?*

To be certain, no two countries are alike and no two political moments in those countries are identical. But there are valuable general lessons to be learned that can be applied based on a clear-eyed analysis of the situation at hand.

I. What Are The Situations That We Are Dealing With When We Talk About A 'Politically Sensitive' Environment?

The first step in acting strategically is to take a clear look at the situation you are dealing with. The complex and difficult political environments on the rise in Latin America today (and elsewhere) are marked by three profound challenges:

1. The Undermining of Human Rights and Child Rights

Governments in the region are engaged in an escalating set of actions that undermine human rights and child rights, cutting back on hard-won progress. In Brazil, for example, the government proudly expresses negative views about human rights, children's rights, and the Statute on Children and Adolescents (ECA). There and elsewhere governments are seeking to reduce the age at which children can be tried as adults, have undertaken episodes of violent repression (including against children) and are seeking to shield police and military who commit acts of violence.

Governments like these often like to speak in terms of 'order and security' and to use that as license for violent repression. The violent response to gang criminality in Brazil and elsewhere often ignores the basic rights of people (often children) affected and includes repressive police operations. Similarly, governments have expressed a tolerance of violent attacks on environmental activists, LGBTQ activists and others called out by the government as adversaries. Repressive governments have also triggered refugee crises, such as in Venezuela, that have left thousands of people and thousands of children without fundamental rights to health, education and other basics.

2. Repression of Political Space

Another common feature of these political contexts is the silencing and repression of key civil society and NGO voices, deemed by governments to be 'too critical'. Organizations have been shut down and their leaders put on trial. International NGOs have been ejected from the country. Government critics have been jailed or threatened into silence. In Brazil the government has sought to blame environmental NGOs for the starting of fires that have destroyed Amazon rain forests. In places where protests have become widespread, children have been endangered by all sides, first by bringing them into harm's way at the protests, then subject to violence, arrest and abuse by governments breaking up those protests. All of this has a deep chilling effect on democracy and on organizations and actors that UNICEF considers important allies in the work for children's rights.

3. Political Polarization

These trends in government behavior are also reflected in a deepening of political and popular polarization in the countries involved. Even non-political matters such as wearing a mask or going out to eat (in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic) are taken as political expressions of one kind or another.

Often these divisions are deliberately driven by the government itself, for its own political purposes. UNICEF teams report that it has become difficult to speak about certain issues and to reach out to certain people, because that polarization and division has become so deep and widespread.

II. How Do Those Political Conditions Impact Children's Rights and UNICEF Advocacy for Children?

These political patterns in parts of Latin America and beyond have significant implications for UNICEF advocacy in those countries. Some of these involve risks in the overall political atmosphere and others that are very specific about UNICEF's dealings with government and other key actors.

1. Some Issues Have Become Far More Complicated

UNICEF's mandate, in any country, is to be a voice for children and to defend children's rights across a broad range of issues. In an atmosphere of political complexity, many of those issues have become caught in the fray. As UNICEF speaks to the rights of migrant and refugee children, some governments have deemed these children to be something between a nuisance and danger. The same holds true for the rights of street children and, as mentioned above, children in the juvenile justice system. Under ordinary circumstances UNICEF felt far more free to speak openly about issues such as these without political repercussion or pushback. Now issues like these require UNICEF to be strategic in a different way, taking into account the push back and reaction that its comments and advocacy can easily provoke. Across the region, UNICEF teams report that Human Rights is no longer the powerful frame it once was on issues like these.

2. It Has Become Harder for UNICEF to Keep from Being Dragged into the Political Fray

As one UNICEF leader in the region describes it, "We are not partisan [with regard to party], but we are also not impartial [with regard to children's rights]." When an issue of child rights is at stake UNICEF has a clear responsibility to take a stand. But in a highly politicized and polarized environment every statement or action by UNICEF gets seen through that same lens. A government, for example, that is not pleased with a UNICEF observation that it deems critical of one of its policies, might be quick to dismiss or attack UNICEF as 'taking sides' in the political battles around that government. UNICEF staff in contexts like these find it more complicated to speak openly without their words being interpreted (unfairly) as partisan. Here as well, every statement or move becomes something to pass first through an analysis of how it might be interpreted or abused in the current political context.

3. Relations With Government Have Become More Complicated

The foundation of UNICEF's relationship with government is cooperation, laid out in a set of specific agreements including the Country Program Document. Advocacy of any kind always pushed that relationship to some degree, moving from simple cooperation to nudging government action in the direction of child rights. In countries where the political environment has become complex, the risks for UNICEF's relationship with government runs across a wide spectrum.

In the current context of Latin America, Nicaragua occupies an extreme situation. In September 2010, a UNICEF Representative, the UN Resident Coordinator (2015) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) were sent from the country by order of the government. In September 2015, the government launched a new procedure in the Development Cooperation policy in which all the resources and projects of external cooperation would be administered and implemented by the

institutions of the Nicaraguan State “without intermediaries.” Since October 2015, the UN in Nicaragua does not have a Resident Coordinator in the country.

These kind of direct attacks on UN staff that government wants to get rid of do not always take the form of declaring them as PNGs, publicly making the point. They also do it behind the scenes, by telling an agency’s headquarters that a certain person is no longer needed in the country (‘made redundant’) and then cutting that person off from communications and access with the government. This forces both regional offices and headquarters to decide how best to respond.

UNICEF has also been limited in its ability to work with NGOs and civil society organizations as implementing partners of the Cooperation Programs (a standard building block of UNICEF operations globally). All meetings that UNICEF holds with any government ministry must be previously approved by the Foreign Ministry, which also usually sends a representative to attend and listen. Similar efforts have been made in other countries as well.

The situations faced by other UNICEF offices in the region are not so extreme but still include substantial points of tension with some governments. One staff member in the region described the risk as the loss of ‘advocacy space’ with governments. “If they are upset with you, they don’t listen to you, they don’t invite you to meetings.” This direct advocacy space is a critical element in UNICEF advocacy and its loss has a significant impact on UNICEF’s ability to be the voice of children in policy making. Sudden statements by high level officials, sometimes even the president, can have a huge and immediate impact. If the president goes on television and makes some negative comment about UNICEF or the UN generally, it can have a chilling effect on the willingness of line ministries to meet with UNICEF staff. “We are very concerned with the rights of children and sometimes the government doesn’t like that,” said one UNICEF staff member.

4. Civil Society Relationships Have Become More Complicated

The most effective UNICEF advocacy work for children is generally done in alliance with other actors in the country – NGOs, social movement organizations, academia, business groups, and others. But these advocacy alliances become much more complicated when the political context begins to squeeze, or even close entirely, civil society space. UNICEF offices have seen key partner organizations silenced and in some cases shut down. For UNICEF this means several things. It denies UNICEF critical advocacy partners at a moment in which advocacy partnerships have become more important than ever. It also means that some civil society groups, threatened in ways well beyond UNICEF, feel compelled to respond more aggressively in their self-defense, calling out the government or engaging in acts of protest. This may put allies at a distance from the sort of tactics that UNICEF can engage in and create tension with its partners. In situations like these UNICEF has to make decisions about if and how to speak out about those political attacks against allies. “Our mandate includes defending civil society space,” said one UNICEF staff member.

5. The Impact on UNICEF and UN Institutional Relationships

Political complexities like these force all the UN institutional actors involved to undertake a new kind of risk assessment, sometimes formally and sometimes informally. How much is each willing to challenge government and risk retaliation in some form? How much is each willing to speak honestly in public, and on what issues? This can also include a good deal of UN self-censorship as a means of avoiding risk.

Not every institutional actor will assess that risk or respond to it in the same way. Within a UNICEF office not all staff will have the same view. Within UNICEF, the country office, the regional office and headquarters may not have the same view of how much risk is appropriate and under what circumstances. Among UN agencies in the country, there may be significant differences in how much political risk each deems appropriate. Much of that depends on how the resident coordinator chooses to operate and how she or he will assess risk and interpret the need to speak out .

What UNICEF headquarters chooses to say or not say about a country or regional level issue also has an impact. It will affect the country office's credibility and relationship with government, civil society allies, and other key actors. What UNICEF headquarters chooses to say or not say regarding migration policy in the U.S., Mexico and Central America is a very strong example in this regard according to staff in the region.

III. UNICEF Strategies for Operating in Challenging Political Environments

Being strategic in advocacy work means looking at the whole picture – the issues involved, the actors, the likely reactions to different approaches – and moving forward in a planned and smart way. In the kind of challenging political environments now at hand in much of Latin America and elsewhere, acting in a strategic way is doubly important. Here are five key strategic approaches identified by UNICEF leaders in the field.

1. Prioritize

In the end, it is UNICEF's responsibility to be the defenders of children's rights, even in the hardest of political contexts. Between the choice to remain silent and the choice to speak out forcefully (in public or private), there is a middle ground in which UNICEF picks its battles carefully. Doing so is about doing a strategic risk analysis and not getting sucked into non-strategic conflicts. UNICEF teams have to find that balance between pushing and holding back that maximizes its impact in a difficult political context.

For example, an incident in which children have been killed is one that UNICEF cannot ignore and must address forcefully. Challenging the government on an issue like school closure, on the other hand, might be done more subtly. As one UNICEF staff member explained it, "We have red lines on issues where we have to speak out." At minimum UNICEF can at least document what is happening that impacts children's rights so that the situations involved are not ignored.

2. Alignment of Public and Behind-the-Scenes Advocacy

Even more than in less challenging political contexts, it is important to align advocacy done in public and in private to match the issue and the politics around it. As an example, UNICEF might publicly publish data (e.g. on the number of children without access to the internet at home) and at the same time engage with the relevant regulatory body and/or private sector companies in private, to discuss possible solutions. Offices have also found it useful to have someone designated to closely follow discussions in the congress or parliament to identify possible key moments for intervention, or to identify possible partners who support its agenda. This type of 'intelligence gathering' can be crucial in identifying key moments for public engagement, such as by presenting facts and figures in a press release.

3. Messaging Strategies

A core aspect of advocacy is messaging, which has to be done strategically as well, even more so in difficult political contexts such as these. UNICEF staff who are familiar with this challenge offer several suggestions for a way forward.

One is to pick your language carefully. “Let the data speak for itself, rather than wrapping it in the language of good and bad.” How many children are out of school? How many children do not have full vaccinations? Just documenting the data is not likely to be viewed as a provocation in the same way as adding characterization to that data. However, the CO do not always have access to the official data that UNICEF generally monitors, or official outlets make up the data they use. Framing messages in this way is akin to reporting that it is zero degrees outside versus complaining that it is too cold. Sometimes the facts alone make the case. Another approach is to frame that data and analysis in a way that speaks to what has the most power in that political context. If access to education can’t be sold simply as a human rights issue, perhaps political leaders will hear that message more clearly in terms of the economic impacts in the future of a generation unprepared for a modern labor market.

It is also important not to fall into the media trap of being characterized as a critic of the government, unless it is by direct, deliberate strategic choice. UNICEF communications efforts need to be tuned to the politics, in the sense that it thinks out in advance how those messages are likely to be reported by the press and taken by the government. The key approach is to highlight information and speak clearly about what the problem is for children, without adding needless political baggage to that.

4. Government Engagement Strategies

In any political context, even difficult ones, advocacy involves direct engagement with government. UNICEF staff have suggested several approaches for how to do that in a problematic political context. One key strategy is to deliver hard news – criticism, damaging data, etc. – direct and in private rather than having officials first see it in public. As one UNICEF staff member said, “No surprises.” How to balance that private delivery with public comments will vary based on the issue, the urgency, the risks, and most importantly what approach will most effectively deliver on UNICEF’s goals in that situation.

It is also important to maintain solid government relations at many levels. In countries with a highly advanced civil service that tends to remain stable from administration to administration (Chile is one example) a substantial part of that relationship is professional and carried out at a technical level. Here it is important for UNICEF to maintain solid and ongoing relationships with mid and top level people in the various ministries. UNICEF has also found in countries with difficult political contexts that it can still find strong alliances in the legislative branch where there may be more diversity of views and a greater chance of finding allies and champions. In larger countries that have significantly decentralized government (Brazil and Mexico are examples), and have national contexts that are difficult to operate in, it is useful and important to maintain solid working relationships at the subnational level, even to the municipal level. There are often valuable options there to advance UNICEF’s objectives for children.

5. External Alliance Strategies

Strong advocacy alliances are important for UNICEF in most political contexts, but in challenging ones like those spreading in Latin America, alliances may be more crucial still. One key approach is to look for allies that do have a direct or productive relationship with the government. They might be private

sector actors, or academics, or popular sports figures. Any of those might strengthen UNICEF's influence in a difficult context. Another source of potential support are foreign embassies, particularly if they represent a donor country with close ties to the host government. These kind of relationships can help press UNICEF's advocacy priorities for children behind the scenes at high levels. Others in UNICEF also say that it is important, even in challenging contexts, to help lift up the voices of children and youth, and to not let that be lost. But this needs to take into account its potential impact and also the safety of the children and youth involved.

6. UN Alliance Strategies

In political contexts where there is risk to speaking out, some UNICEF staff say it is better if it can be a part of a combined UN voice. That joint voice, they say, has more power and more safety than UN acting on its own. But different UN agencies have different priorities and different levels of political risk they feel comfortable with. Getting every agency on board may be impossible, or at least time and energy consuming and too slow to make a difference. In cases like these, some UNICEF offices have found it effective to team up with just one or two other UN agencies in the country. This still gives their voice added weight, but in a much less cumbersome way. This is a situation where the resident coordinator can often play a crucial role in facilitating a joint or unified approach and can also play an important role in behind the scenes advocacy

The UNICEF regional office and UNICEF headquarters can also each play a valuable supporting role, depending on circumstances. They can say things publicly, for example, without the ramifications and risk of the country office saying those same things. The regional office can offer cross-country comparisons (for example, comparing child vaccination rates) that might add pressure on a country government to act. It can also draw regional attention to a local situation in instances where that is helpful.

It is important to note, however, that this kind of UNICEF assistance from a distance is not always helpful and can actually get in the way if it is not done carefully. Those involved from elsewhere need to have a solid political understanding and pay close attention to the analysis and views of the people on the ground in that country. In some cases this kind of involvement just creates more work for the UNICEF team at the country level. Internationalizing some issues can also create national level backlash. This seems to be the case in Brazil where global calls around rainforest protection have provoked nationalist reaction.

Conclusion

UNICEF operates as a defender of children's rights in more than 190 nations and territories around the world. At any given moment, some of those places are going to offer up very difficult political environments in which the challenges for children and youth are substantial and the relationship with government difficult. As noted here, being strategic in these contexts is critical. This guidance note offers some suggestions based on UNICEF's on-the-ground experience in such places, but the recipe for approach will never be the same in each context.

UNICEF representatives in particular are the captains of the ship in these difficult waters and it is possible to do more to support them. The nature of this support will vary from country to country and representative to representative. Some of that assistance come from within the country office and

especially from national staff who can offer a deep analysis of political developments. Some will come from the regional office, as long as it is tuned-in to the political realities involved. Representatives want to know that the regional office has their back in tough situations. Representatives also reach out to one another as peers, benefiting from one each other's experience in such political environments. In other cases representatives and other UNICEF staff develop a network of people in that country who understand the politics involved and can offer insight.

It is in challenging political contexts like these that UNICEF advocacy for children often matters most. Even though it is often difficult, and with higher risk, it remains some of UNICEF's most urgent work.