



# **UNICEF Advocacy in Upper Middle and High Income Countries**

**A UNICEF International Conference  
Panama City June 9-11, 2015**

**Conference Report Prepared by the Facilitator  
September 2015**

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## Introduction

*“UNICEF is mandated by the UN General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children’s rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential.”*

– UNICEF Mission Statement

Advocacy for children’s rights across the world is fundamental to UNICEF’s institutional mission, as it has been since its founding in 1946. In the words of one UNICEF country representative, “We pay so much attention to advocacy that it is in our DNA.” But how can UNICEF’s advocacy for children be made as effective as possible? That is a question that is being asked across the institution as it heads toward its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In June 2015 more than three-dozen UNICEF leaders – from country offices, national committees, regional offices and UNICEF headquarters – gathered in Panama City to look at how to strengthen UNICEF policy dialogue and advocacy in high income and upper middle income countries. [According to the World Bank](#), 133 of the world’s 196 nations fall into these two categories (high income = 80, high middle income = 53), ranging from Albania to the United States. For UNICEF, this broad category of nations has special importance for its advocacy work for children for two reasons.

First, it is in these nations where UNICEF’s work is increasingly focused on advocacy activities that call on and support governments to fulfill children’s rights through public policy and public programs, rather than through support for direct services and projects (funding vaccination programs, for example). Second, as nations slowly move up the national income scale, UNICEF expects more nations where it works to join these higher-income nations where policy dialogue and advocacy is vital.

*Advocacy* is a word that, within UNICEF, means many different things to many different people. UNICEF staff use the term to refer to: meetings and relationships with public officials; media messaging to build public and political support for UNICEF objectives; engaging young people as defenders of their own rights; forming linkages with civil society; developing evidence to support policy change; and other activities. All of these definitions and more came together during three days of intense dialogue and conversation in Panama.

As Jeffrey O’Malley, UNICEF’s Director of the Division of Data, Research and Policy, noted in his introductory comments in Panama, the conference represented an important moment for a group of people to come together who do not generally have the opportunity to come together to discuss UNICEF advocacy for children. This report is an effort to capture an overview of what participants had to say, the ideas they discussed, and some consensus points they arrived at for

how to strengthen this essential element of UNICEF's work in the nations where it plays such a significant role. Following the flow of the conference itself, the report covers three main topics:

### *1. The Context for UNICEF Advocacy for Children*

As many at the meeting noted, advocacy cannot be separated from national context. Drawing from advance material prepared for the conference as well as a robust conversation at the meeting, the report looks at the economic, social and political contexts at hand in these nations and the impacts those differing contextual factors have on UNICEF advocacy for children's rights.

### *2. Inside the Work of UNICEF Advocacy for Children*

The Panama meeting also facilitated an important global discussion about the work of advocacy within UNICEF. This includes a closer look at a pair of children's issues where that advocacy is a particular challenge; a strategic look at UNICEF's key advocacy audiences and how to engage them; the art of crafting UNICEF advocacy communication; and the examination of special new advocacy opportunities at hand in the pending global approval of the Sustainable Development Goals.

### *3. Institutional Issues for UNICEF Advocacy for Children*

Finally, UNICEF advocacy cannot be separated from UNICEF as an institution – the resources and gifts it brings to the table as well as the organizational challenges it faces as it carries out that important work. Conference participants looked at a broad set of these institutional issues and came forward with a set of practical suggestions for how to help UNICEF move as an organization to be more 'fit for purpose' in its advocacy work in these key countries.

What this report offers at its heart is a collective wisdom on the work of advocacy. That wisdom is of direct value not only to UNICEF staff in the countries that are its focus, but to all those who act in defense of children's rights, in nations rich and poor.

*Jim Shultz*  
*The Democracy Center*

# **I. The Context for Children's Advocacy in High Income and High Middle Income Countries**

A wide variety of contextual factors shape the environments in which UNICEF advocacy for children takes place. Some of these factors pose a challenge to that advocacy and others help pave the way for advancement of children's rights. But all are elements that must be taken into account in the formulation of advocacy strategy. For purpose of synthesis, these contextual factors fall into three broad categories: economic and social factors, the key challenges posed for children's rights, and the political landscape in which UNICEF advocacy for children must take place. Led by a presentation prepared by the DRP and with reaction and comment by panels from the regional and country levels, the conference unpacked each of these and looked at what they mean for UNICEF advocacy for children.

## **1. Economic and Social Contexts**

The political fortunes of children's rights are closely tied to the economic fortunes in a country. In times of prosperity public investment in children can rise with the tide and in times of economic decline the effort to secure such investments suffers. The 2008 international financial crisis and the economic impacts that came after loom still as an important backdrop to advocacy work on children's rights.

In its presentation, the DRP observed that the 2008 global recession and its aftermath hit many high and upper-middle-income countries fairly hard, with some yet to fully recovery and many forecast to suffer economic struggles for some time. In turn this took a toll on the public sectors in these countries, making it harder to finance services for children.

Not all parts of the world suffered economic recession over these years. Participants noted some important regional differences on that score, as modest to strong economic growth continued throughout the global recession in parts of Asia and much of Latin America. There the challenge has been to assure that economic growth benefits all children and does not leave behind the children who are most vulnerable.

However, across Europe, in the US, and elsewhere, economic downturn and so-called 'austerity' has taken a serious toll on children. Damaging trends already in motion were exacerbated. As the DRP noted, "In many high and upper middle income countries, income inequality has widened markedly in the past two decades, driven by the unprecedented income growth of the

most affluent. Equity issues now sit squarely at the center of the debate over children's rights in high and upper middle income countries."

Speaking from a national committees perspective, Eliana Drakopoulos from the PRP office observed, "Austerity has had a devastating impact in Europe. In more than half the countries twenty percent of the children are living in poverty and in many it is more than thirty percent. Austerity doesn't look like it is going away anytime soon. We have more than 7.5 million young people, the population of Switzerland, not in education, training or unemployment."

From the CEE/CIS regional office, Lesley Miller told a similar story, "On the whole things were getting better [on children's rights] but with the financial crisis things have gotten worse, much worse in some cases. Child poverty is on the rise in almost all of the countries." Even where economic downturn has not been a major factor, however, deep pockets of child poverty remain, in Latin America, for example.

The other hard reality that threatens children around the world is the global migration crisis. Some children flee with their parents in escape of war, some in escape of poverty. In either case migrant children, across all continents, face special poverty and marginalization. Conference participants noted the numbers of children unable to attend school or forced to attend especially poor ones and warned of inadequate access to basic services such as health care. While the origin countries of these children are not generally high or upper middle income, their destination countries are. "In some countries fifty percent of the workforce is foreign," added Osama Mallawi, UNICEF's Oman representative. Those workers represent hundreds of thousands of migrant children as well.

Participants noted the impacts of discrimination against these children. "When UNICEF uses the term 'universal' we mean *all children*," observed Wivina Belmonte, the UNICEF Representative in Malaysia. "When the government uses that term they mean *all Malay children* [excluding a host of migrants and ethnic minorities]." Similar observations about marginalization were made about Roma children in Europe, refugee and migrant children in the Middle East, and other examples.

Whether through austerity or migration, child poverty and inequality are growing in particular, according to the DRP, in the marginalized fringes of urban areas. As the DRP writes, "Poor urban children are often facing multiple deprivations of their rights, and often come from the social, ethnic and migrant communities that have the least political voice."

The participants agreed that this combination of economic, social and political marginalization of migrant children, minority children, children with disabilities and others makes UNICEF's role as an advocate for all children even more crucial in these country contexts, on behalf of a generation of children that could otherwise be left behind.

Complicating the scenario further in high and upper middle income countries are a pair of demographic trends. As the DRP analysis notes, many of these countries are experiencing a combination of declining fertility rates and fewer births along with an overall trend toward aging societies. That undermines political support for children's services in two ways. There is more pressure to prioritize social spending toward the medical and other needs of the elderly and an aging population is also a harder one to convince to invest in children, especially if many of those children live on the other side of an ethnic and class divide from the majority.

These are the backdrops of social and economic context that produce a set of challenges for children at the heart of UNICEF's advocacy agenda in high and upper middle income countries.

## **2. Key Challenges Facing Children and Youth**

For the reasons articulated above, child poverty and income inequality sit at the center of a good deal of UNICEF's agendas for children's rights in high and upper middle income countries. As the DRP writes, "Equity issues now sit squarely at the center of the debate over children's rights in high and upper middle income countries."

Linked closely to poverty and inequality is the issue of 'vulnerability.' In many countries children and their families may have risen out of poverty but live on austerity's precipice, poised to fall back into poverty at the blow of a parental illness or job loss, for example.

While these poverty-related issues were a major focus of the conversation in Panama, participants identified a set of other important urgent and emerging issues.

Across many high and upper middle income countries youth unemployment and underemployment have risen to historic levels. As the DRP writes, "High levels of youth unemployment contribute to the disillusionment and disempowerment of adolescents who see little way to build a life for themselves in the future." Given ongoing economic stagnation in many of these countries, adolescents and young people face futures of uncertainty, unable to begin careers or make their way into the labor force at a critical time in their lives.

Violence against children continues to be a concern in high and upper middle income countries. Of special concern is sexual violence aimed at girls and violence aimed at unaccompanied migrant children.

The DRP noted that new communication technologies have also raised new agendas for children's rights. On the one hand these technologies have connected and empowered young people in potent and historic ways, with valuable implications for youth-driven advocacy. However, young people left behind in access to these technologies also risk getting left behind economically and politically. Another dimension of the digital revolution's impact on children involves digital safety, cyber bullying and related issues. All these issues, participants observed, requires that UNICEF have a clear child rights agenda on these technology-related issues.

The other major emerging issue identified by the DRP is global climate change, a topic just beginning to rise to priority in UNICEF's child rights agenda. Economic disparity, migration, and similar issues sit at the heart of the UNICEF agenda, and those threats to children will be only exacerbated in the face of global climate change. As the DRP notes, it is in high and upper middle income countries where carbon emissions are highest and where a focus on children could play a role in helping support the adoption of public policies aimed at addressing the crisis.

### **3. High and Upper Middle Income Countries – the Political Contexts**

Over and over again in Panama, participants in the conference emphasized that national income is not the primary factor in defining the national context most relevant in terms of UNICEF advocacy. It is the political context that more deeply defines the environment for UNICEF policy dialogue and advocacy. For example, while Libya and Costa Rica might sit next to one another on a World Bank chart of national incomes, they have radically different political contexts in which children's rights must be advanced and defended. Those contexts can be differentiated in several important ways.

One of those ways is about whether UNICEF's advocacy agenda for children has the winds of public support at its back or in its face. Campaigning for pre-school access in Peru (a goal likely to win broad support) is a very different advocacy challenge than taking on child marriage in Malaysia (a position that faces stiff cultural opposition). Social conservatism was identified as a particular source of political wind in opposition to key elements of UNICEF's children's rights goals. In Bulgaria, UNICEF faced strong opposition from social conservatives on a general child rights law. In Thailand, UNICEF struggles with social conservative opposition on its agenda on



teen pregnancy and adolescent sexual education. In the words of one UNICEF staff member, “It makes a big difference if you have an opposition.”

Even in political environments that were once considered highly supportive of children’s rights, there is backsliding that impacts UNICEF advocacy. “We have a big shift to the right in countries where national committees are operating,” observed Eliana Drakopoulos from the PRP. “And there is less commitment to social policies that could benefit children.”

Another key factor is the political space in the country to carry out strong advocacy. In some countries that space is wide open, the political process benefits from a vibrant civil society and the information with which government operates is both empirically solid and easily accessible. In other countries advocacy can get you arrested or get you killed. “We have some countries that have zero political space,” said Lesley Miller from the CEE/CIS, noting the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia.

“In the Middle East we are talking about monarchies, so we don’t have vibrant civil societies,” observed Osama Mallawi from Oman. “Instability is growing throughout the region [the Middle East] and resources going to war do not go to children.”

UNICEF’s overall approach to advocacy needs to be very different in such widely different contexts. More on this is discussed in Part III.

A third key political context point discussed in Panama deals with government capacity. Even if a government is willing to move forward on UNICEF’s children’s rights agenda and key elements of the CRC, that doesn’t mean it is able to do so.

In its analysis for the workshop, the DRP noted the sophisticated and stable political environments in most high and upper middle income countries. “Plural democracy, with elections every 4-6 years is the most dominant form of government. Most high and upper-middle-income countries experience stable transition of power; [they] have sophisticated functioning governments and political systems with the capacity to deliver policy change for children.”

But this is not always the case. Implementation is challenge in many countries, where the laws may say all the right things about children’s rights, but the deliverables and reality on the ground can look very different. “In our region we have institutionalized discrimination,” said Lesley Miller from the CEE/CIS regional office. “We have legal frameworks but our huge challenge is getting accountability for the implementation of those legal frameworks [for

children’s rights].” Bottlenecks to implementation can take many forms – political resistance, fiscal limitations, weak administrative capacity, etc. While implementation challenges are most commonly associated with low-income countries, the nations under the umbrella for discussion in Panama are not exempt from those same difficulties.

## **II. Inside the Work of UNICEF Advocacy**

Within all these varied contexts for UNICEF policy dialogue and advocacy is the concrete work of that advocacy. Participants in the Panama meeting looked together at a set of key elements: issues that pose special advocacy challenges; connecting with key audiences; effective advocacy communication; and the potential opportunities of the new UN Sustainable Development Goals.

### **1. Difficult Issues**

Across the panorama of issues that are the focus of UNICEF advocacy in these countries, two stood out as posing a particularly difficult challenge, from an advocacy perspective – child poverty and issues affecting adolescents.

As noted earlier, child poverty is not just about the absence of income but about a set of deep challenges to children’s rights. “We are using an income measure to hide other problems,” cautioned Joaquin Gonzalez-Aleman, the regional social advisor for LACRO. “We need to find another way to describe how countries are doing – multidimensional poverty. It is about whether children go to school, if they live in cramped spaces.”

Others observed that in some countries how ‘poverty’ should be defined is an issue. Eliana Drakopoulos noted that France, for example, does not disaggregate its poverty data by ethnicity, claiming that its statistics need to be color blind. The result, she said, is to effectively mask over inequity issues facing migrant children and other minorities, something UNICEF does as well if it relies on that same damaged data.

Two twin challenges identified at the meeting were to be sure that UNICEF, and in turn governments, are accurately understanding the full profile of child poverty, and then breaking through the political resistance to taking action on child poverty. That political resistance, again, is often driven by the fact that many of the children affected are from populations such as migrants, Roma, and other marginalized peoples with little political capital and limited public support.

Adolescent issues are another difficult area for UNICEF advocacy. Often these touch on sensitive issues such as sexuality and mental health that invite backlash. Adolescent issues also lack the same appeal for donors, governments, and the general public in the way that issues impacting young children do. Participants in the Panama meeting observed that UNICEF doesn't have the same deep experience on these issues as it does those affecting young children. As one small group discussion concluded, "UNICEF lacks a clear and coherent discourse about adolescents."

Nevertheless, these issues were marked as an important priority by many who attended the Panama meeting. Focusing on adolescent issues is an important way to build on the progress made among smaller children. Youth engagement in advocacy on those issues offers UNICEF a chance to tap into creativity and spirit that benefits UNICEF. It was noted as well that young people around the world are critical agents of change and many participants expressed a genuine desire to see UNICEF connect with their issues and their energy in a more strategic and concerted way.

## **2. Key Audiences**

An important part of effective advocacy is the identification of key audiences and establishing and maintaining effective relationships with those audiences. In the Panama workshop, participants focused their analysis on three:

### *a. Governments*

Governments sit at the center of UNICEF advocacy for policies to protect and expand children's rights and UNICEF's relationships with governments are central to its advocacy strategy. The first element of this strategy is access. In some countries access is easy, with UNICEF staff in regular consultation with officials from the bureaucratic level to the very top. In other cases UNICEF country offices use more creative means to get to the leaders they must reach. "The only time I speak with the Prime Minister is when we do a fundraising show on television and then he comes and he makes some promises to the nation," said Tanja Radocaj, UNICEF's Bulgaria representative. Through means both formal and informal, country offices work to build those relationships so that governments see UNICEF as a solid working partner.

Following access is the challenge of persuasion and understanding what arguments and information governments will find convincing, and at what times. The centerpiece of UNICEF persuasion is evidence and participants in the workshop offered many examples of the kinds of data, reports, and publications they use to have advocacy impact. On the other hand, in many

countries and political cultures where UNICEF operates evidence alone has little impact. “We have a big challenge in our region when it comes to evidence-based policy-making,” observed Wivina Belmonte, speaking about East Asia and the Pacific. “That’s not a very well-appreciated concept.”

Why hasn’t the government done what it is UNICEF is asking them to do? Understanding the bottlenecks is fundamental. “It could be ignorance, capacity limits, differing priorities, political will, or resource limits,” noted Joaquin Gonzalez-Aleman, social policy adviser to LACRO. “It’s about pushing the right buttons, observed Tanja Radocaj. “Sometimes it’s evidence, sometimes it’s speaking with the Minister, sometimes it is mobilizing popular support.” Those buttons vary greatly by region and context.

Meeting the rhythms of the political process is another approach, adapting to the timing of when new governments are seated, when political calendars call for policy development, and more, all of which is very specific to the country involved. In Latin America, for example, some UNICEF offices have had success using the strategy of raising children’s issues during election campaigns, when public attention is higher and politicians most eager to make bold commitments. Such a strategy, however, would not work well in East Asia, for example, where participants suggested it would be taken as UNICEF inserting itself inappropriately into domestic politics.

Another important set of entry points are the formal processes of policy development – special committees, planning processes, and similar structures. Several participants suggested that UNICEF could do a better job of carrying out advocacy for children in the budget-making process, through strategies such as child-based budget analysis and even seeking the insertion of child-rights conditionalities into budget plans.

In many countries UNICEF advocacy has to take into account the powerful influence of international political actors from outside the country. Sometimes this can be used to UNICEF’s advantage, such as the power and influence wielded by the European Union in parts of Eastern Europe. “It is very powerful when we can link our advocacy to the E.U. That speaks to the government,” observed Tanja Radocaj about Bulgaria. On the other hand, sometimes powerful international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF push governments in the opposite direction of UNICEF’s priorities, such as protecting services for children in the face of budget austerity. In these situations UNICEF regional offices and UNICEF headquarters can play an important role in helping country offices better understand how these IFIs operate and help them make their case to those institutions at the country level.

Many participants observed that a key source of UNICEF's advocacy power with governments is showing them real models of success, often from other countries, that help officials understand what UNICEF is proposing and offer them a high level of confidence about its practicality. On issues such as child-support grants for poor families or mainstreaming children with disabilities into the public schools, showing how it works elsewhere is a powerful advocacy tool that draws on UNICEF's unique worldwide experience.

Among UNICEF staff working in less developed countries, many observed that the key bottleneck may not be willingness or will on the part of government officials, but the lack of administrative capacity to carry out decisions or programs after they are approved. Here is where UNICEF work focuses on 'the enabling environment' for government action. It is a role that ranges from having deep involvement in government planning processes (in some cases UNICEF offices find they have deeper professional capacity than the government itself), to funding certain aspects of a program that have a catalytic effect in terms of drawing public resources (teacher training, for example, to compliment construction and staffing of new schools).

Finally, participants noted that some issues are simply more sensitive than others. When advocating on issues such as sexuality education for teens, for example, UNICEF staff need to develop an intuition about when advocacy helps advance an issue and when it just prompts backlash. As Jorge Valles from Ecuador noted, "It is important to know when to push and when not to push on sensitive issues."

#### *b. Civil Society*

Civil society organizations constitute one of UNICEF's most important advocacy allies across a wide range of country contexts. Participants noted that alliances with these organizations offered diversified and expanded connections (with government and others), added legitimacy, connections to direct constituencies such as parents and young people, as well as other advantages. Civil society groups are also often freer to say certain things in public that, while factually true, are also politically sensitive in ways that prevent UNICEF from speaking about them in public with the same clarity.

One clear message that came out of the Panama discussions on this topic was the value of UNICEF as a convener of civil society groups. Especially in less developed countries, UNICEF often finds itself with more general capacity than civil society organizations and by serving as the 'glue' that brings groups together UNICEF adds value not to its own advocacy work but to the civil society and democratic culture as a whole. "We sometimes think that we are the big fish in the pond and end up working alone and I think that's a mistake," said Robert Gass,

reflecting on his work with the Thailand country office. He cited a host of valuable allies, including both civil society groups as well as other UN agencies.

“The convener role is a value-add across the region,” agreed Wivina Belmonte from the Malaysia office. “Government sees us as a legitimate and safe conduit to civil society and civil society sees us as a crucial bridge to the government.”

Participants also observed that in countries where political space is being limited and civil society finds itself under attack, UNICEF has a critical role to play in protecting and amplifying political space and strengthening the role of NGOs and other groups. UNICEF is in a position to do that through joint undertakings with civil society and in generally strengthening their capacity through trainings and other activities. “UNICEF has more political space than many of our civil society allies and a part of our role is to widen and create that space for civil society to have a platform,” said Lesley Miller from the CEE/CIS office.

### *c. The Private Sector*

UNICEF offices have a multifaceted relationship with private sector actors in different countries. Companies and others are seen primarily as potential donors and many give generously to support UNICEF’s work, at the country level and more broadly. Participants observed how a broad and diverse donor base demonstrates broader public support for UNICEF’s work (and its advocacy) and gives it an added measure of accountability.

In some countries private sector companies are also viewed as potent potential allies for advocacy, especially for the added weight they may carry with government and political actors. This seemed to be especially the case in Asia where political and corporate actors are often closely tied. “Their voice will resonate a million times more loudly than ours,” said Belmonte.

On the other side of the coin, however, participants noted the ways in which corporate interests and UNICEF’s agendas are not always aligned. “UNICEF has had a standing offer from Coca-Cola for years,” observed Bernt Aasen, the LACRO regional director. But given the company’s close connection to child obesity and other health issues for children, the relationship would badly damage UNICEF credibility. There are also political issues where private sector interests and UNICEF’s are not in alignment. “When companies don’t pay taxes, that impacts children,” said Joaquin Gonzalez-Aleman from LACRO.

### **3. Communication and Reaching the Broader Public**

A key power of UNICEF advocacy is its communication, the ways it frames its messages on behalf of children’s rights, makes those messages clear and compelling, and link them to issues

the broader public cares about. Participants in the Panama meeting had a good deal to say about communication and building broader public support.

“You have to create a certain bubble where all the actors are centered around one goal,” said Claudia Gonzales Romo, UNICEF’s chief of public advocacy. UNICEF does that in a variety of ways.

Data and evidence is often at the center of UNICEF’s case for action on children’s rights, but participants from many contexts noted the importance of packaging that data in different ways for different audiences, sometimes complex and deep, sometimes simpler and more thematic. Participants agreed that UNICEF needs to be able to speak about the same issues in different ways to different audiences, but with a consistency throughout.

The heart of that messaging is story-telling. Sometimes those stories are tailored toward the ‘investment case’ for spending on children, for example, how investing in prenatal care and vaccinations early translates into reduced health costs down the line. More often those stories are embedded in the language of child rights and the duties that governments have under the CRC. While the CRC sits at the center of UNICEF’s mandate, some participants in Panama noted that the language of ‘duty’ and ‘international agreement’ doesn’t translate well in some contexts and that the CRC is seen as ‘a western document’. UNICEF staff in these contexts explained that they get more political traction by speaking in the more general language of ‘children’s rights.’

Others noted that even the language of ‘rights’ has mixed political power depending on nation and context. In Latin America, for example, a rights framework is broadly accepted; in parts of Asia, less so. Participants from Asia said that there, arguments often find more resonance if framed in terms of ‘human capital’ and linked to the language of economic growth.

Some participants noted the risk of speaking out on certain sensitive political issues, especially if it sets up a potential conflict with the government. But they also noted the risks of silence as well, and the damage that silence can do not only to children’s rights but to UNICEF’s credibility as well.

Across all regions and contexts, however, there was broad agreement that clear and strategic communication remains a core element of UNICEF advocacy and that it has to have the power to cut through in environments where the airwaves and media are full of messages on issues, from NGOs, political actors and others. “Communication skills are key,” said Robert Gass, “and you can work with all staff to help them speak clearly and coherently about UNICEF’s work.

#### **4. The Special Opportunity of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

At multiple points during the discussions in Panama participants talked about the potential power and new opportunity for children's rights presented by the new UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calendared for approval in September at the UN General Assembly. Participants saw the SDGs as an opportunity for both reframing and also advancing issues and advancing UNICEF's standing as an organization.

The SDGs will help move the conversation about development from one largely about GDP and economic growth, participants noted, to a larger conversation about social and environmental indicators. Those, in turn, will speak more directly to key issues of children's rights. Furthermore, governments will 'own' those indicators and standards, others noted, in ways that will also increase the political pressure on them to advance children's rights in their countries.

A major change from the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs is the principle of 'universality' embedded in the latter. The duty of affluent nations going forward will not be just to provide assistance to impoverished countries but to attend to the needs of those impoverished in their own countries. This potential marks a very significant change in focus for National Committees, which will be well-positioned to lead domestic advocacy efforts toward full implementation of the SDGs within those countries, and especially the children's rights agendas they contain.

Participants spoke about the need to not only prepare for advocacy on the SDG implementation going forward, but to 'humanize' the SDGs. This means making them understandable and compelling to the vast majority of people who have never heard of them and who do not understand their potential significance for children and other important interests.

### **III. UNICEF Fitness for Advocacy**

On the second day of the workshop it became apparent that there was a set of issues that the participants very much wanted to talk about that had not been adequately factored into the agenda – the institutional environment within UNICEF and how it impacts UNICEF's organizational 'fitness' for advocacy. The workshop facilitators changed the agenda to make that a central topic for discussion.

UNICEF speaks of advocacy as creating the 'enabling environment' for good public policy and good outcomes for children, but how is UNICEF positioned as an enabling environment for effective advocacy for children? Three main matters sit at the center of that question:



## 1. The Development of UNICEF Advocacy Expertise

In its work on policy dialogue and advocacy, what UNICEF most brings to the table is expertise. It has deep knowledge about a wide variety of children's issues and is a powerful library of tested solutions to problems. UNICEF offices are filled with people who are extremely smart and deeply knowledgeable. But participants noted that while its 'issues expertise' is strong, its advocacy expertise is less systematic.

"Advocacy requires political acumen." Various versions of that observation were repeated often and across regions. Strategic policy dialogue and advocacy requires a sophisticated understanding of not only the issue but of the political subtleties of the country and the more universal subtleties of persuading institutions.

Bernt Aasen, from LACRO, maintained that, "You need to in-source advocacy capacity. It is work that requires very high skills and you need to have those in-house." He also made the case that, while elements of that advocacy work can be shared as a team, "The chief advocate for UNICEF is the representative. You can't hide. That's your job." The role of the country office representative is crucial.

The discussion produced a strong list of suggestions for how to strengthen UNICEF's internal capacity for policy dialogue and advocacy. These included:

- *Conduct a global-level advocacy capacity assessment:* to see where there are gaps in skill and capacity and where there are opportunities for cross-learning.
- *Factor advocacy experience and skill into UNICEF recruitment:* taking note that the talents and skills associated with some elements of UNICEF's work don't necessarily match the talents and skills of advocacy.
- *Consider investment in staff for advocacy:* investments that in many cases may produce more positive outcomes for children than direct programming.
- *Make development of an advocacy strategy a mandate:* a baseline that all country offices should build into their planning.
- *Develop an approach to engaging national staff:* who are often an untapped source of political insight.

- *Develop a method of assuring continuity as international staff come and go:* noting that the arc of an advocacy effort is unlikely to match the arc of the arrival and departure of senior staff.
- *Provide advocacy training and mentoring:* a systematic approach to steadily increasing the overall level of expertise on advocacy in the organization.
- *Designate an advocacy focal point:* a person or a team that is responsible the office's overall advocacy work.

This wisdom from the Panama participants is rooted in their practical experience with policy dialogue and advocacy across continents, contexts, organizational leaders, and time.

## **2. Institutional Systems and Support for UNICEF Advocacy for Children**

A consensus that arose out of the group's discussion was that UNICEF, at a corporate level, should offer strong support for advocacy at the country level, but not a set of commands.

For example, while participants thought it was important for UNICEF to have global policy and advocacy priorities, they also expressed a common view that it would be a mistake to impose those on country offices. Each context is different and various issues are ripe for action and advancement at different times and in different ways.

On the other hand, participants did identify a set of things that it felt UNICEF could do at a central level that would be highly useful:

- *The creation of a central 'advocacy portal' for UNICEF:* a one-stop-shop for materials, links to other UNICEF advocacy efforts, and a collection of other resources.
- *Development of a set of UNICEF advocacy case studies:* to be used as a learning tool and to demonstrate in an evidence-based way, the value of UNICEF policy advocacy and dialogue.
- *Incorporate brief advocacy case studies in annual reports:* as a tool for highlighting policy advocacy and dialogue activity.
- *Review the format of UNICEF reporting:* looking at reporting mechanisms through the lens of policy advocacy and dialogue to see how that activity can be better captured.

- *Material for the UNICEF executive board:* providing the board with a report documenting the positive results of UNICEF advocacy work.
- *Coherent headquarters guidance:* on how advocacy should be carried out and on how to handle sensitive issues and situations.
- *Advocacy monitoring:* develop a coherent system for how UNICEF offices can monitor their advocacy and measure progress forward.

These are some of the major suggestions and points raised by the participants in Panama, but the essential point overall is that UNICEF staff from all corners are interested in a more systematic and strategic approach to institutional support for policy dialogue and advocacy.

### **3. Managing Risk in UNICEF Advocacy for Children**

By its nature, policy advocacy carries an organization into areas of potential institutional risk, and UNICEF advocacy is no exception. Advocacy in defense of children’s rights can put UNICEF at odds with governments, with political parties and political interests, and at times at odds with the winds of local public opinion. In a frank discussion of these issues in Panama, UNICEF staff were clear that potential risk must not keep UNICEF from speaking out in defense of children’s rights, but at the same time there was a broad opinion that such risk must be managed in a strategic manner.

That strategic approach begins with having a solid political analysis. Who are the main actors and their interests? What are the ‘political red lines’ in terms of what is risky to say and do and what is not? How is UNICEF perceived and how does that perception affect political risk?

Based on such an analysis, participants in the conference developed a list of potential risk-management strategies:

- Seek out political intelligence from national staff, academics, journalists, NGO allies and others in a position to offer it.
- Separate individual risk from institutional risk by letting UNICEF be represented, in especially sensitive situations, by regional or global staff instead of country staff.
- Seek to build popular support for UNICEF’s child rights agenda in the country.

- Use international human rights structures to help deliver the message on especially sensitive issues.
- Know when UNICEF might be wiser to take a backseat and let other organizations, local or international, take the lead.
- Look for safer entry points or back channels where UNICEF can deliver its message effectively but with less political risk.

Several participants commented that an increased UNICEF presence on advocacy should not eliminate its more direct program work. Said one participant, "Otherwise we become just like any other NGO asking the government to do things including things they might not want to do."

But in the end there will always be moments of conflict, when the essential rights of children are under threat and when, for UNICEF, inaction is not an option. "We lose credibility if we don't speak out when there are violations of children's rights," said Lesley Miller from the CEE/CIS. "That doesn't necessarily mean speaking out publicly, but we do need to do something about it."

## **Conclusion**

As noted at the start, policy dialogue and advocacy is central to UNICEF's institutional mission and is only going to become even more important in the years ahead. UNICEF brings to this work a set of powerful resources that are the envy of other actors on the children's rights scene. It has a 'brand' and a reputation known round the world and held in high esteem. It has a clear mandate to lead the battle for children's rights. It has financial stability, a large and highly-talented staff, and connections from the community level to the highest levels of global power.

Yes, UNICEF has yet to turn all those resources into the full capability for advocacy that it could. To do so it needs to root its advocacy work in the discipline of strategy, with a clear sense of the advocacy paths that will take it from where it begins to the achievement of the policy objectives it seeks. It will require clear and solid commitment to advocacy by its leaders across the organizations. It must also adequately staff that advocacy so that the concrete work involved advances.

If UNICEF does these things and weaves into its advocacy work the important collective wisdom expressed in this report, it will become an even more potent advocate for children's right that it

already is. The millions of children living around the globe very much need UNICEF to be as effective as advocate as it can be.

## **Annexes**

1. Meeting agenda
2. List of meeting participants
3. “The Universe of HICs and MICs”: Analysis from the UNICEF DRP

## Glossary

*CEE/CIS*: Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States

*COs*: Country offices

*CRC*: Convention on the Rights of the Child

*DRP*: UNICEF Division of Data, Research and Policy

*HICs*: High Income Countries

*IFIs*: International Financial Institutions

*IMF*: International Monetary Fund

*LACRO*: Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office

*MDGs*: Millennium Development Goals

*SDGs*: Sustainable Development Goals

*UMICs*: Upper Middle Income Countries