



SUBMISSION

to the

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

on

The link between aid and human rights

Gaye Phillips

Chief Executive

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UNICEF AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION ON THE LINK BETWEEN AID AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Introduction

The Australian National Committee of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF Australia) takes this opportunity to present a written submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade addressing the link between aid and human rights.

UNICEF Australia is a non-government organisation established in Australia to support the work of the United Nations Children's Fund. UNICEF is the only United Nations organisation dedicated exclusively to children.

UNICEF works with other United Nations agencies, governments and non-government organisations to provide community-based services in primary healthcare, nutrition, basic education, and safe water and sanitation in over 160 countries. UNICEF aims to reduce the terrible toll the lack of such services takes on the world's most vulnerable and youngest citizens.

A rights-based approach to aid

Human rights are fundamental to UNICEF's work. UNICEF, as part of the United Nations system and guided by the United Nations Charter, has a responsibility for the realisation of human rights. UNICEF is bound and guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In all the countries in which UNICEF works, it has a human rights approach to its programming¹. It uses the CRC as a frame of reference for operational activities through country programs of cooperation.

Rights programming means more than service delivery and also includes engaging major partners in policy dialogue intended to initiate structural change and social transformation.²

UNICEF Australia acknowledges the commitment by the Australian government to direct its aid towards poverty alleviation since the victims of poverty are most often children and women. The overseas aid program reflects the Australian Government's adherence to its obligations under the CRC, which it ratified in 1990.

¹ Bellamy, Carol, *A Human Rights Approach to UNICEF Programming for Children and Women: What it is, and some changes it will bring*, CF/EXD/1998-004

² Newman-Williams, Marjorie, *UNICEF programming from a "rights" perspective*, address to National Committee Information Workshop, Martigny, Switzerland, March 1999.

This submission illustrates how the human rights framework is ideally suited to the existing Australian aid program, and is better for development in the long-term.

Terms of reference addressed in this submission

We have commented briefly on all terms of reference.

1. Activities which have the advancing of human rights as their objective.

We look broadly at the three areas of activities. In principle, UNICEF Australia supports each type of activity, whether bilateral, regional or global, as long as it is a child-centred program. We provide examples of development activities which promote human rights in a timely and effective manner.

2. Utility of aid instruments.

We comment on the usefulness of the differing aid instruments, with case studies and examples from UNICEF's projects in partnership with AusAID.

3. Human Rights Program activities

UNICEF Australia supports good governance activities and urges the Australian Government to continue and maintain, at least, its current levels of funding.

UNICEF and a rights-based approach

A rights-based approach to programming means being mindful of basic principles of human rights that have been universally recognised: inter alia, the equality of each individual as a human being, the inherent dignity of each person, the rights to self-determination, peace and security. Among human rights instruments, the CRC and CEDAW are the most widely ratified and the most directly relevant to the Australian aid program.

Programming from a rights perspective does not mean that for every article of a treaty there must be specific indicators to measure it and an appropriate program or project-level response. This would, in fact, be contrary to the spirit of these treaties, which have key principles or "foundation articles" that underlie all other articles. The foundation articles of the CRC, for example, express the overarching principles of non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, the right to participate and have one's views considered and the right to survive and develop.

Analysis from a rights perspective should lead to an understanding of the mix of causes that together prevent some children from enjoying their rights. Data should be disaggregated by sex, geographic origin, age and ethnicity in order to expose disparities, which are too often concealed by averages. National laws should be analysed to check if they protect all children and women equally or whether in the application of laws there is inherent discrimination. The allocation of national resources should be analysed to check whether it actually reinforces discrimination against women, girls, certain ethnic groups or disabled children, or helps to overcome it. Also, macroeconomic and social sector policies and programs should be examined, to ensure that they are consistent with the general principles of human rights and whether in fact they provide a sound basis for the progressive realisation of rights.

A human rights approach to aid programming also calls for more inherently integrated, cross-sectoral and decentralised activities, and for participatory approaches recognising that those the Australian Government is trying to help are central actors in the development process.

A rights based approach introduces the following additional important considerations:

- the notion of the **legal and moral obligation and accountability of the State** and its institutions with regard to meeting the basic needs of its people;
- the affirmation that **children and women** are subjects of rights, or in other words they **are rights holders, not objects of charity**. This change in attitude also initiates a process whereby children, within the context of their evolving capacities, participate in the processes and decisions that concern them and affect their lives;
- the principle that **benevolent and charitable actions, while worthy, are insufficient from a human rights perspective**.

The debate on the link between aid and human rights: additional issues

First, in using human rights treaties as the foundation for development, the international community has to balance the wide scope of these instruments with the need to set clear and realistic program objectives. What are required, therefore, are innovative strategies and interventions that will translate ethical and legal principles into practical program activities with verifiable results.

Secondly, using a rights-based approach, the ultimate "results" of development efforts may be longer in coming and harder to measure and quantify. It will thus be necessary to re-examine and modify traditional monitoring mechanisms, indicators and information systems, while preserving efficiency and effectiveness.

Finally, the issue of how development should address those rights that are politically sensitive, and hence controversial, merits further discussion. As in other areas of international law, human rights raise questions about the limits and scope of national accountability. When a government ratifies an international human rights instrument, it commits itself as well as all actors in society - the media, NGOs, civic associations, schools, development partners, and others - ensuring that those rights are recognised, respected and fulfilled. In this way, the rights approach to programming implies that developing nation governments will expand the scope of participation to encompass society as a whole, assuming collective responsibility for both the fulfillment and monitoring of rights.

1. Activities which have the advancing of human rights as their objective

(i) Bilateral country programs

The effectiveness of bilateral country programs in advancing human rights is clearly demonstrated by the following case study, AusAID's India country program. One of its components is the Primary Education Enhancement Project, which aims to assist the Indian Government in its efforts to alleviate exploitative child labour. It is implemented through a partnership between the Indian Government, UNICEF and the State Governments of Delhi, Bihar and Maharashtra. The project's strengths include the following:

- involving the community in the education of all children;
- providing alternative, flexible, non-formal learning centres to cater for the needs of the children outside the formal school system;
- motivating the teachers and making the learning environment more attractive to the students in order to increase enrolments of 6-11 year olds and maintain their enthusiasm.

This well-targeted and flexible bilateral aid project was successful in achieving its aims while adhering to the key principles of the aid program. The human rights, in this case economic and cultural rights, of the beneficiaries - girls, working children and the poor - were advanced.

Further examples of highly effective, child-centred bilateral programs are the programs for the girls' education in Laos and Bangladesh.

(ii) Regional programs in Asia and the Pacific

Australia's regional development assistance programs are another effective means by which human rights are promoted in the Asia-Pacific region.

UNICEF has a huge presence in the region and cooperates with Australia on a number of human rights-based activities, e.g. maternal and child health care, sex worker counselling and people trafficking. Programs like these result in the protection of the rights of the region's most vulnerable children and women. In particular, Australia has a crucial role to play in the war against HIV/AIDS in the Asia-Pacific region, and hence a critical stakeholder in the right to health for people in this region.

UNICEF Australia encourages the Australian Government to continue to fund human rights-based regional projects and in particular the prevention of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, together with the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS, particularly in Cambodia and Burma.

(iii) Global and multilateral programs

UNICEF Australia applauds the Australian Government for its contributions to multilateral organisations whose work directly improves the human rights of children and women. During 1999-2000, the \$A61.1 million in contributions to UN development and humanitarian organisations, was channelled to the world's poorest communities through UN agencies such as UNICEF.³ The human rights-based approach to UNICEF programming ensured that the Australian funds were used in the most effective and sustainable programs, at all times working in partnership with developing nation governments.

³ *AusAID Annual Report 1999-2000, Volume 2*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2000, at p. 54.

2. Utility of aid instruments

(i) Project aid

UNICEF Australia is currently managing 35 AusAID-funded projects in 20 developing nations. The three case studies attached illustrate how project aid is the ideal instrument for advancing human rights in the developing world.

Project aid incorporates the key principles that underpin Australia's aid program. UNICEF Australia projects in the developing world **focus on partnerships**. Our projects' timeliness and effectiveness rely on the partnerships built up over many years, between UNICEF country offices and the host governments. For example, reaching the most remote communities in Western Burma in order to protect children's health rights (universal child immunisation program) would not be possible without the cooperation of all levels of the Burmese health bureaucracy. By using experienced locals (often themselves recruited from within the host country's bureaucracy), UNICEF ensures that the aid reaches its intended recipients and on target.

Project aid allows the Australian government to **be responsive to urgent needs and development trends**. For example, UNICEF Australia/AusAID's humanitarian projects in Sudan illustrate the positive impact of Australian Government funding to date. Sudan is the largest emergency program among 16 countries currently designated as 'complex emergencies' by UNICEF. Problems faced include protracted conflict, displaced populations, disease outbreaks, poor nutrition, health and sanitation conditions and widespread human rights abuses - including abduction, rape and violence against civilians, particularly women and girls. Landmines impede the delivery of humanitarian assistance, as well as the orderly movement of people and commodities. In 2000, the humanitarian community will pursue three major goals: survival and growth, human rights promotion and special protection and peace building.

UNICEF Australia's projects are designed, in partnership with the relevant UNICEF country office, with **practical approaches for poverty alleviation and the promotion of sustainable development**. Since 1992, UNICEF Australia with the support of AusAID has support basic education for ethnic minorities in Vietnam. The overall goal of the project is to reduce the high failure and dropout rates among ethnic minority children, particularly girl children through the promotion of Multigrade and Bilingual Education (MBE) in primary schools of 14 provinces. Project activities include the development of different kinds of teaching and learning materials, provision of in-service teacher training, dissemination of relevant teaching and learning materials to multigrade primary schools and establishment of semi-boarding schools.

Clear priorities are identified in UNICEF Australia's projects. In the above-mentioned Vietnam project, the objectives are to improve the quality of education throughout 14 provinces through the training of 750 multigrade and bilingual teachers, of which 70% will be women. Primary school enrolment is to be increased to 80%, retention to 75%; and completion rate of Grade 5 to 70%, through improved teaching, provision of materials, and improved school facilities, throughout target schools.

Through rights-based project aid, **Australian values are reflected abroad**. A child's right to a name is taken for granted in Australia. Registration of birth is the State's first

acknowledgment of a child's existence. It represents recognition of a child's significance to the country and of his or her status under the law. This ticket to citizenship opens the door to fulfillment of rights and to the privileges and services that a nation offers its people. In Bangladesh, birth registration is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, birth registration provides essential demographic data. Currently, the lack of basic demographic data in Bangladesh adversely affects planning of basic social services for children. Secondly, birth registration is closely connected to child protection issues and is seen as a key strategy for improvements in the fields of juvenile justice, child labour and child marriage, all of which are serious problems in Bangladesh. Without birth registration, the absence of evidence of age makes implementation of laws and procedures designed to protect children difficult. Finally, birth registration has proven to be an effective means of mobilising local officials for social planning for children. By closely linking birth registration to child rights, a wide array of child related issues can become the subject of discussion and discourse by groups not normally reached by other communication. For these reasons, UNICEF Australia and UNICEF Bangladesh are committed to the promotion of birth registration in Bangladesh.

At all times, project aid, characterised by its small, targeted and outcomes-oriented approach, promotes the principle of **openness to new ideas and approaches**. The *Bhutan Multigrade Teacher Attachment Program* has been supported by AusAID and UNICEF Australia since 1992 to allow as many Bhutanese teachers as possible to benefit from exposure to high quality teaching practices in Australian primary schools. UNICEF Australia and UNICEF Thimphu are committed to the successful and ongoing implementation of this education project, as it addresses major developmental needs faced in Bhutan effectively and consistently.

The multigrade approach was conceived as a means to address the problem of teacher shortage and high teacher-pupil ratios in small rural schools. However, many techniques used in multigrade, such as division of classes into smaller groups, designing self-study worksheets, organising classroom space, and monitoring progress of individual students, are aspects of good teaching practice that can be applied in any learning situation. Teaching quality is enhanced insofar as teachers trained in multigrade methods are better equipped to instruct children who are learning at different levels of ability, as the teachers no longer rely upon an approach whereby one ability level is targeted and children who are either above or below that level must make do as best they can. The *Bhutan Multigrade Teacher Attachment Program* to Australian schools has been one component of several initiatives to upgrade the skills of teachers and administrators at the primary level of education in Bhutan.

Attachment placements are organised through the University of New England (UNE) in Armidale. As many Bhutanese, including several sponsored by AusAID, have studied at UNE, the UNE Program Coordinator is very familiar with the Bhutanese system of primary education. This contributes to the success of the placement insofar as the program can be tailored to meet the particular needs of Bhutanese educators. Heightening this administrative capacity, principals and teachers in the many and varied participating schools throughout the Armidale area have been eager to provide their school's resources and share their professional experience regarding multigrade teaching with visiting Bhutanese teachers. The project is very responsive to the training needs of the Bhutanese teachers.

(ii) Microcredit

UNICEF Australia supports the Government's use of microcredit for advancing the human rights of women. The UNICEF Australia Lao Development of Women and Families Project is an example of women's rights-based programming which advances Australia's national interests by reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development. The purpose of the project is to help increase the capacity of, and opportunities for, members of rural communities, particularly women, to plan and implement local social and economic development initiatives that will improve the quality of life in their villages particularly in improved education and health (especially the nutrition of children and increased food security through rice banks), better use of resources (both financial and environmental), and increased community safety.

The major development objectives of this project are

- To increase capacity of planning committees at all levels to plan, manage, monitor and evaluate social action programs.
- To increase the participation of women in planning committees at all levels to 40%
- To provide women with adequate financial resources through credit-banking schemes to enhance their families' well being.
- To increase the knowledge of rural communities regarding health, nutrition, education, community safety and land rights.
- To improve gender equity in enrolment rates and completion rates of children at primary school level.
- To increase food security from a 1-year supply of rice to a 2-year supply of rice for each village.

UNICEF Australia recommends that the Australian aid program continue to use microcredit aid as a means of advancing the human rights of women.

(iii) Debt reduction of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC Initiative)

UNICEF Australia believes that debt is a human rights issue. The demand on governments to service debt repayments makes it very difficult for those governments to restructure their budgets towards more child-centred priorities and social development programs. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, spends more on servicing its \$200 billion debt than on the health and education of its 306 million children.⁴

As Shridath Ramphal wrote in *The Progress of Nations 1999*, it is children who pay the highest price of debt:

“Debt has a child’s face. Debt’s burden falls most heavily on the minds and bodies of children, killing some, and stunting others so that they will never fully develop. It leaves children without immunisation against fatal, but easily preventable, diseases. It condemns them to a life without education or – if they go to school – to classrooms without roofs, desks, chairs, blackboards, books, even pencils. And it orphans them, as hundreds of thousands of mothers die in childbirth each year, die as a result of inadequacies in health care and other services that poverty perpetuates.”⁵

The HIPC Initiative, applied effectively, is an excellent tool for advancing human rights. If countries were freed of their debt burden, they would have more resources for alleviating the poverty of their people. More than a third of the children in the heavily indebted poor countries have not been immunised, and about half the people in those countries are illiterate⁶.

Africa, home to 33 of the 48 least developed nations, should be first in line for the HIPC initiative. The most distressing situations and the ones most riddled by conflict and political instability are in Africa. Such relief would constitute a small fraction of what the world financial community committed to assist the Asian financial crisis, virtually overnight.

Of all the bilateral aid reaching Nicaragua, as much as one in every two dollars boomerangs back to donors as debt repayments. UNICEF Australia applauds the Australian Government’s recent announcement to write off Nicaragua’s debt of \$A6.3 million under the HIPC Initiative. Such relief will enable Nicaragua to achieve a wide range of objectives, including universal free primary education, improved primary health care for 1.2 million people, and safe water for 600,000 more of its citizens.⁷

UNICEF Australia urges the Australian Government to continue to support the HIPC Initiative, and to harness its unique capacity to influence regional neighbours, through diplomatic, political, economic and trade means, to encourage them to follow suit.

⁴ Ramphal, Shridath, “Debt has a child’s face”, in UNICEF, *The Progress of Nations*, New York, United Nations Publications, 1999

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.* Calculated by OXFAM, 1999.

One-off cancellations: the Jubilee 2000 campaign

The Jubilee 2000 campaign calls for a one-off cancellation of unpayable debt. It is claimed by some that cancellation would create a “moral hazard” by rewarding irresponsibility. But reckless lending helped cause the debt crisis, so the responsibility is a joint one. Besides, the debtors have already repaid what they owe in actual cash terms; clearly, a greater moral hazard is created by continuing to insist on extreme financial stringency at the expense of children’s lives.⁸

Cancellation is an opportunity for both creditors and debtors to launch a war on poverty and direct resources to the most needy, by concentrating on human development. It is consistent with the 20/20 Initiative (see below). While the HIPC Initiative is the long-term solution to debt, UNICEF Australia urges the Australian Government to take part in Jubilee 2000 to the maximum extent possible.

The 20/20 Initiative

This plan for financing basic social services from national resources and donor funds was agreed upon by all governments at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995. UNICEF Australia urges the Australian Government to implement the “20/20” vision adopted at the World Summit. This would see Australia introducing measures to increase its aid allocation for basic social services to 20 per cent of its total aid budget.

⁸ *ibid.*

3. Human Rights Program activities

UNICEF Australia supports the Australian Government's activities under the Human Rights Program. Through its good governance policy initiatives, the Australian Government has encouraged acceptance within the international community of the notion that the right to development helps promote a culture of prevention.

Human rights training of officials in neighbouring countries is to be applauded as an essential element of a human rights-based aid program. Governance work through the Human Rights Fund, the Centre for Democratic Institutions and in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, is complementary to the other elements of Australia's overseas development assistance program.

Worthy of note is the continuing need for institutional strengthening in the region, long-term, people-to-people, capacity-building strategies. Such good governance and human rights promotion is precisely what underpins UNICEF's own country programs.

UNICEF Australia urges the Australian Government to continue to maintain good governance as a priority in its aid and trade programs.

Recommendations

UNICEF Australia recommends that the Australian Government

- adopt a foreign aid programming approach that is guided by human rights principles enshrined in the treaties Australia has ratified;
- fund programs that clearly adopt a rights-based approach;
- fund programs that explicitly seek to create conditions that allow women and children to participate more fully in community life and in the development of policies that affect them;
- use its role in the Asia-Pacific region effectively and appropriately to promote the standards of the CRC and CEDAW;
- continue to fund bilateral, regional, global and multilateral programs which have the advancing of human rights, particularly children's rights, as their objective;
- continue to fund human rights-based regional projects, with an emphasis on prevention of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS;
- continue to use project aid to advance human rights;
- continue to use microcredit aid as a means of advancing the human rights of women;
- continue to support the HIPC Initiative;
- continue to make strong financial contributions to the UN, encourage other nations to do the same, and strive to reach the base target of 0.7% of Gross National Product to fund Official Development Assistance;
- implement the 20/20 vision adopted at the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), by introducing measures to increase Australia's aid allocation for basic social services to 20% of its total aid budget;
- continue to maintain good governance as a priority in its aid and trade programs.

Appendix A: AusAID/UNICEF Australia case studies

Burma: the child's right to health and health services

UNICEF Australia is helping to realise children's health rights in Burma (Myanmar). During a recent monitoring trip, the projects officer saw the results of UNICEF's rights based aid work. The project is a result of a combined effort by UNICEF Australia and UNICEF Myanmar to immunise all children who are less than a year old against tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough, neo-natal tetanus, polio and measles.

Article 24 of the CRC builds on and develops the right to life, as well as survival and development to the maximum extent possible as set out in article 6. It requires States to recognise the right of all children without discrimination to "the highest attainable standard of health" as well as to "facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health".

The midwife squeezes two drops of oral poliomyelitis vaccine into a baby's mouth, then dips the baby's pinky finger into some blue ink to show that s/he has been immunised. Well over 90% of babies in the villages visited have been fully immunised by UNICEF in the past year.

Together with AusAID, UNICEF Australia has funded a two-year, \$280,000 program of immunisation in three predominantly Muslim townships in Northern Rakhine State, far western Myanmar. UNICEF Australia pays for auto-destruct syringes and safety boxes, which ensure that the children of Rakhine are immunised with clean, sharp needles that can only be used once, and then the needles can be disposed of safely.

The two townships benefiting from this project, Buthidaung and Maungdaw, are made up of several villages of Rohingya people who lead a subsistence lifestyle. As the senior nurse and community health volunteer (from the local community) go on their rounds, children followed them, all keen to receive the vaccine. Health staff followed up one case of acute flaccid paralysis. A UNICEF paediatrician examined the boy, aged 8, having him walk up and down, on tiptoes and then heels. He did so easily, with only a slight limp. He had benefited from early detection and treatment, and had received the polio vaccine along with his younger siblings. He will be fine, able to walk to school and participate fully in life.

Part of UNICEF's work is to teach the parents about the benefits of immunisation. We have held community meetings with religious elders, recorded pro-immunisation pop songs in the local language, and given fully immunised children t-shirts depicting a healthy, smiling baby receiving drops and shots.

This is how a rights based approach to aid makes a difference, between a child's life and death. Without this approach, there would not be sustained campaigns of such simple but vital projects like universal child immunisation in these remote areas.

Sri Lanka: protection of children affected by armed conflict

In Sri Lanka, the strong alliance of government, organisations and individuals promoting a call for the treatment of children as "zones of peace" is harnessing the gathering

momentum for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict in order to create space for children in the midst of the conflict. The \$150,000 UNICEF Australia/AusAID children as zones of peace project is working to build peace through promoting the rights of the children of Sri Lanka.

The concept of “children as zones of peace” was developed by UNICEF in the mid 1980s. This concept pertains to the rights of the children in a conflict situation, to be protected, not to be used in conflict and to be helped to recover. Warring parties stop their fighting whenever children are in the area, hence zone of peace. In Sri Lanka, the concept embodies a Call for Action to all individuals, government and organisations to understand, embrace and implement children as zones of peace.

The ongoing conflict in the north and east of Sri Lanka has persisted for over 17 years, resulting in the loss of over 58,000 lives and the displacement of over a million people. The ethnic conflict has been the cause of gross violations of human rights and serious economic, social and political instability. All Sri Lankan children are exposed to the far-reaching effects of a war they inherited and there are more than 270,000 internally displaced children in Sri Lanka at present.

UNICEF's program of assistance in Sri Lanka has, as its starting point and framework for action, the CRC, which the Sri Lankan Government ratified in July 1991. The cornerstone of UNICEF's co-operation with the Sri Lankan Government for this project is Article 38, which stresses the States Parties obligation "to protect the civilian population in armed conflict" and assigns responsibility to States Parties to take "all feasible measures to ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict."

The objectives of the project are:

1. to raise awareness that children in war must be recognised as zones of peace;
2. to assist the social rehabilitation of all children affected by armed conflict; and
3. to strengthen the protective role of UNICEF by encouraging protection measures for children at the societal, national and international levels, especially with respect to child victims of war, child soldiers, child ex-combatants and children separated from their families.

Specific project activities include: dissemination of Zones of Peace publications in three languages; training of army and police personnel and NGOs; and public media campaign using print media, radio and TV.

One example of the achievements of the project is the "days of tranquillity", where UNICEF negotiated a day of peace with both parties to enable a national vaccination day for children. Sri Lanka now ranks higher than any country in immunisation coverage and has been free of polio since 1993. The project is also conducting training in the zones of peace initiative and on how to implement other best practices.

Bangladesh: child's right to be registered immediately after birth

AusAID and UNICEF Australia have combined to support a project that protects the rights of one of the most vulnerable groups in Bangladesh, the children. Bangladeshi children often bear the brunt of the harsh economic and social conditions faced by families in this

struggling country. In order to make ends meet, many children become victims of exploitation, through child labour or child prostitution. Others are married at very young ages, whilst those who come before the courts are tried according to adult, rather than child, laws.

The \$300,000 AusAID/UNICEF Australia project protects children by promoting child rights through a birth registration campaign in three districts, Laximpur, Kurigram and Kishoreganj. The project is expected to protect over one million children through registration and many more through creating an awareness of children's rights within Bangladeshi communities.

The UNICEF Australia project officer for the campaign visited the project in June 2000. During his time in Bangladesh he visited one of the AusAID/UNICEF Intensive District Education for All (IDEAL) schools to talk to children about their experiences. He asked the class some standard questions, including how old they were. This caused immense confusion and it became clear the children simply did not know. Very few children knew their age and it was very hard to find out, as only 3% are estimated to be registered at birth. This conflicts with Article 7 of the CRC which states: "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents".

Birth registration protects children's rights in several ways. Firstly it assists in the implementation of child protection laws. There are many laws in Bangladesh that protect children from early marriages, child labour, child prostitution and youth detention, and yet they are rarely applied, as it is difficult to establish the ages of children. Magistrates, for example, regularly assume a child is 17 during sentencing, thus circumventing juvenile detention laws. Similarly the majority of girls are married illegally under the age of 18, with ceremonial staff unable to determine their ages.

Secondly, birth registration assists in planning. Apart from a census conducted every ten years, planning officials simply do not know how many children are being born in different areas, making the allocation of educational and medical resources extremely difficult. The health workers and family planning officers who have enthusiastically volunteered their time to the project have reported that registration activities have minimised drop-out rates during immunisation periods.

A third form of protection comes through children benefiting from the sensitisation of communities to the importance of child rights. The campaigns are highly visible events that attract media and the support of national and district level officials, as well as local village leaders and community health workers. All receive training in child rights and their messages permeate through communities to create a more supportive and caring social environment for children.

Contact Details

Any questions relating to this submission should be addressed to:

Ms Alanna Sherry
Advocacy Manager
UNICEF Australia
PO Box A2005
Sydney South NSW 1235

Tel: (02) 9261-2811 ext. 204
Fax: (02) 9261-2844
Email: asherry@unicef.org.au