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Notes

[Archives: CF/NYH/SP/SUM; Folder: S0355.] Contents: Section 1: Members of the Planning Committee - Schedule of (remaining) meetings and activities; Section 2: Schedule and Programme of the World Summit for Children; Section 3: Draft Declaration of the World Summit for Children - Draft Plan of Action; Section 4: Report of Meetings: - 1st, 2nd, 3rd Meetings of the Planning Committee - Meetings of the Working Group on Format - ~~Meetings of the Working Group on the Declaration - Statement of Agreement of the six Initiating Governments -~~

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UNICEF

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A Global Agenda for Children Beyond Year 2000
Comments and review
UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa

Synopsis of review methodology. UNICEF MENARO has held a two-part review of the Discussion paper, A Global Agenda for Children Beyond Year 2000. In the first, internal, part of the review, the discussion paper was circulated to all UNICEF country offices in the MENA region, and to all staff in MENARO itself. Comments were made through discussion in many country offices.

For the second part of the review, a small panel of six experts was constituted. The members of the panel were leaders in civil society, journalism, academia, and private voluntary organizations, and came from four countries in the region.* The panel was guided by four questions:

- * Whether these themes will adequately address the needs of children in the Middle East and North Africa? Are there themes, or emphases, that should be added?
- * Are these the right strategies to make use of UNICEF's comparative advantage, and to help us work effectively with partners with other comparable advantages?
- * Do these themes and strategies show that we have learned well from our experience in the Middle East and North Africa?
- * Do the real issues facing children in the MENA region come out, and can they be accommodated, in the proposed frame?

It was also agreed that the Region would hold a broader consultation to consider these issues in greater depth, at a later date.

Main issues and areas of concern

Summary. Both the internal and the panel review concluded that while the document opens discussion on critical issues, there is still a need for much greater focus on the issues and strategies which UNICEF should pursue in future. The emphasis on learning from the past is important and even more explicit emphasis needs to be placed on how we can build on both lessons and accomplishments. Creative efforts are needed to break into new ways of thinking. Finally, to make any strategy or approach more appropriate for the Middle East and North Africa region, more attention is needed on cultural and religious factors.

On the focus and scope of the paper:

The expert group thought that no clear methodology was set out for the selection of themes, other perhaps than on issues that are currently important or which have some momentum. In this the paper appears to build on the directions we are currently taking,

* The members of the panel were: Dr. Hoda Badran, former Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, activist in Egypt, and former UNICEF Representative; Ms. Lyse Doucet, foreign correspondent, BBC, Jerusalem; Ms. Asma Khader, lawyer and rights activist, Jordan; Dr. Ali Reza Marandi, former Minister of Health, Iran; Dr. Sabri Rbeihat, Professor, Philadelphia University, Jordan; Dr. Curtis Rhodes, Director, Questscope, Jordan.

rather than “breaking out of the box”. Alternative scenarios are not considered. In-depth analysis of past experience, and more data on what has actually happened, would help to guide the discussion. In addition, UNICEF’s comparative advantage needs to be better identified, and the complementarity with other agencies examined.

Several people felt that the document was written in the language and metaphor which they have come to expect from UNICEF. While this is normally clear and useful, at a juncture at which the future is being considered, new patterns of thinking need to be considered. UNICEF needs innovative approaches to the selection of issues and concerns, and the selection of models, technologies, and means of work. In order to do this, UNICEF needs to be more outward-looking, not inward-gazing.

For example, UNICEF seems to be trying to do too much, perhaps even “everything”. UNICEF should focus on its uniqueness in addressing issues that others do not cover, (such as Early Childhood Development) and should employ strategies that reflect its comparative advantage (as advocate and demand-creator rather than supplier).

In some cases, like adolescents, UNICEF must expand its awareness of and capacity to deal with new areas (“unstarted” not “unfinished” business). Complex social and behavioural issues build on and grow out of the health and education themes that were previously core themes.

Retooling of the organization and of means of working with partners will be needed to take on new issues and approaches, and the learning curve may be long. There is a danger that in-house managers of change are incapable of seeing and engineering large-scale shifts.

In many cases, the state is not only the key partner of UNICEF, but also the focus of the changes that are needed. How can UNICEF retain a creative tension in its work with government? How does UNICEF stand up for the needs of children even when official policies are disadvantageous to children? How does UNICEF work to engage and even strengthen civil society where it is weak?

On the need for a focus/ global goal:

Many of the respondents, both external and from within UNICEF, feel strongly that UNICEF’s efficacy in the past was due to the very clear and well-understood focus of the organization, for Child Survival, and further expressed in the strategies of GOBI. These goals are clearly linked to important accomplishments for children. They created unprecedented political will to undertake and implement extensive and difficult programmes; they enabled clear monitoring which itself promoted greater achievements; they enabled clear accountability.

Moreover, clear global priorities can drive new, challenging or even sensitive goals. The knowledge of accomplishment from other countries puts a useful pressure on governments and other partners as with EPI. A global context makes it possible to deal with previously difficult issues such as child labour or child abuse. A full decentralization of the choice of priorities could weaken the hand of UNICEF offices in raising such issues.

Without a clear programmatic focus and point of leverage for all programme areas, there are risks that

- * UNICEF will be working very broadly but less effectively
- * it will be difficult to explain or “package” and we will lose support.
- * the progress that was possible through the pursuit of common goals will falter
- * country offices, especially smaller offices, will lack capacity to build political will, programme strategies and ideas in the absence of a global framework.

At the same time, there are a number of serious constraints associated with the goals for children:

- * Global goals are by definition not equally appropriate everywhere, and country-specific needs may go unmet.
- * The pressure to achieve measurable goals within a short time frame often results in unsustainable and short term strategies.

Some of the UNICEF respondents maintained that without greater clarity and a common, clearly-defined purpose, UNICEF would have difficulties describing its own work succinctly and convincingly. This could affect our capacity to raise funds. UNDP with less clarity in its self-presentation has taken very large budget cuts in recent years. Agencies with a clear and clearly-expressed mandate, such as UNHCR and WFP have suffered less from budget cutbacks.

The theme of learning was suggested as an organizing principle by one participant. This could be encapsulated as a slogan “I have the right to an education” (in comparison to the previous: “I want to live”.)

On specific themes

In the discussions, the suggestion of theme appeared to be as diverse as the participants and his or her discipline. It was argued to include:

- * Neonatal death: As one third of child deaths occur within first 21 days of birth, if UNICEF cares about survival there needs to be a focus on this window. Not to do so, will signify a turning from the previous, successful approaches taken by UNICEF, and this is surely unfinished business.

Others pointed out that to focus on the neonate it is necessary to take a broader view of the mother and family. Many neonatal deaths are linked with low birth weight; which is linked to poor antenatal care and to the mother’s age, nutrition, and health; which in turn are linked to broader social issues including the status of women, to caring practices, to education, to adolescent health.

- * There is a danger that, in many developing countries, the poor are being marginalised and disenfranchised. UNICEF should focus on some of the more basic causes and processes that cause these problems. In this context, ECD for poor children should be given priority as a strategy to address discrimination, disparities, and the rights of girls

- * The concept of empowerment, especially that of women, which is not sufficiently present in the text.

Region-specific issues

The discussion on how well the Global Agenda reflects priorities and needs in the Middle East and North Africa region focussed mainly on three concerns:

1. issues related to rights in the context of traditional culture;
2. gender issues; and
3. the role of religion.

Traditional perceptions of rights, and the role of the family. In the MENA region, there is great concern with the rights of the family; there is less emphasis in the popular culture as a whole on individual rights. Thus the rights-based approach raises the issue of universality vis-a vis cultural sensitivities and common traditional practices. In addition, a reaction against globalisation and “imported culture” may make it more difficult to mobilize for CRC, and this requires more understanding and innovation in working for rights.

Given the central role of the family, and the power structures within families, in the MENA region the promotion of rights will necessarily involve the promotion and protection of rights through the building of democracy within families.

Gender and age discrimination is pervasive in the region. With respect to the status of women, there are indications of regression. UNICEF should energize and side more forcefully with groups and with movements that advocate women’s rights. There will be conflicts with tradition; here UNICEF needs to stand firmly for the universality of rights, and to find culturally-sensitive ways of expressing these universal rights.

In addition, children are often seen as the property of adults. There needs to be a strong emphasis on combating discrimination and promoting children's rights to express themselves is a key requirement.

One key area bringing together these concerns for universal rights, respect for the family, and to curb age and sex discrimination would be a focus on ending early marriage, which remains acceptable in many parts of the region.

Religion in the MENA region cannot be ignored. It needs to be mobilized as a positive force for progress and dialogue, rather than allowing religious themes to be misused to suppress the rights of women and children. Effort should be put into identifying the beliefs and themes that support child well-being, child rights, and women’s rights.

On the global agenda and the structure of UNICEF

Another topic raised is the implications of the current programmatic discussions on the current and future structure of UNICEF. To assume that our current structures should continue will necessarily colour the programme directions we take. For example:

- * What are the implications of working on child rights in a universal framework, for the current typology of UNICEF offices which are either country programmes, or National Committees? How should UNICEF best work for child rights in

industrialized countries where there may be large numbers of marginalized children?

- * To what degree will our choices of issues or topics be driven by the competencies that we have on staff at the moment? How can we ensure that on the one hand, we are as open as possible to the real needs of children, and on the other to building the skills that we need?
- * How will our current relations with Government and civil society determine the choices of issues and of methodology? How should UNICEF work with civil society in countries where it is weak or highly regulated?

There may also be a need for parallel discussions on the kinds of structures we need to complete our mission.

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