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**International protection of children of concern,  
including education**

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## I. Introduction

1. Enhancing the protection of refugee and other children of concern is a priority for UNHCR, in line with its mandate to provide international protection and seek durable solutions. This report describes recent trends and challenges in relation to child protection, and provides examples of progress made since the last Standing Committee report on this subject in 2010. It also provides an overview of UNHCR's recently elaborated Framework for the Protection of Children and its new Education Strategy (2012-2016).<sup>1</sup>

## II. Trends, challenges and progress

2. Children (i.e. girls and boys below the age of 18) represent approximately 47 per cent of all populations of concern to UNHCR,<sup>2</sup> and approximately 44 per cent of refugees.<sup>3</sup> On average, 52 per cent of refugees in camps are children but often this percentage is higher (reaching 67 per cent in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, for example<sup>4</sup>). In addition, the number of unaccompanied and separated children has been on the rise since 2009, with particularly large numbers identified in certain regions such as the Horn of Africa. According to currently available data, some 17,700 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) lodged asylum applications in 2011, which is a slight increase from 2010.<sup>5</sup> In industrialized countries, two-thirds of all UASC are boys. In developing countries, however, the gender distribution is more equal.<sup>6</sup>

3. Forced displacement exacerbates the preexisting vulnerabilities of children. It puts them at greater risk of being separated from their families, recruited into armed groups, trafficked, and exposed to sexual or gender based violence (SGBV), and subjects them to a multitude of other risks. They are likely to witness and/or experience disturbing events, while at the same time having their social support structures and their education disrupted. UNHCR's protection activities, undertaken in close cooperation with partners, aim to alleviate the negative impact that displacement has on the safety, survival, well-being, and development of children, and to ensure that children have access to necessary support and services. This is reflected in the Office's Global Strategic Priorities for 2012-2013.<sup>7</sup>

4. All actions concerning children should be guided by the principle of the "best interests of the child".<sup>8</sup> UNHCR has taken steps to operationalize this principle, for example, by developing formal "best interests" procedures, which include safeguards to ensure that all decisions impacting the lives of individual children are taken in their best interests.<sup>9</sup> In 2011, UNHCR released a field handbook to strengthen and standardize the

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<sup>1</sup> The protection of children is one aspect of the realization of the Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) policy. An update on the latest developments in relation to the implementation of the AGD policy is provided in EC/63/SC/CRP.14.

<sup>2</sup> Populations of concern to UNHCR include: refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced persons and persons who are stateless or at risk of becoming stateless.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2010, Chapter 5, pp. 48-49, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4ef9cc9c9.html>. Note that information on age breakdown is only available for 42% of persons of concern to UNHCR. Statistics on refugees include 'people in refugee-like situations'.

<sup>4</sup> Dadaab Population Statistics, 18 March 2012, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/horn-of-africa/regional.php>.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR Global Trends 2011 (to be published in June 2012).

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2010, Chapter 4, p. 45, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4ef9cc9c9.html>.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR Global Appeal 2012-2013, pp. 12-14, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/4ec230e916.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, entry into force 2 September 1990, Article 3(1).

<sup>9</sup> *UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child*, UNHCR, May 2008, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/48480c342.html>.

implementation of “best interests” procedures across UNHCR operations.<sup>10</sup> Between 2009 and 2011, UNHCR and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) carried out a global capacity-building initiative to enhance “best interests” procedures, consisting of a global “training-of-trainers” workshop, six regional workshops, and several country-level trainings targeting UNHCR and partner staff. Work is also in progress to develop joint guidance with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on “best interests” procedures for various stakeholders in the European context.

5. Birth registration is fundamental to the protection of children of concern. In 2011, birth registration of newborn children of concern increased to an average of 89 per cent in 73 of 113 urban settings (up from 74 per cent in 2010) and to an average of 51 per cent in 140 of 167 refugee camps (from 50 per cent in 2010). UNHCR supports States in meeting their obligations to register all children born on their territory, including refugee children and other children of concern. In Zambia, for example, UNHCR has undertaken a mobile birth registration campaign in each refugee settlement; this successful intervention which will be continued in 2012. At the global level, UNHCR has formalized its cooperation with Plan International in the area of birth registration. The prevention of statelessness is also a key objective of UNHCR’s activities and advocacy efforts in relation to birth registration. UNHCR is working to raise awareness about the impact of statelessness on children more broadly: in 2012, the Office will release guidelines on preventing child statelessness, as well as an advocacy document prepared jointly with Plan International, on the rights of stateless children.

6. Education serves as a critical means of protection for refugee children, yet they are too often deprived of this fundamental right. Children who go to school are less likely to be recruited by armed groups, forced into early marriage and exposed to SGBV. Quality education in a safe learning environment not only provides children with an opportunity for academic and personal development, but also serves as a protective factor. In 2011, UNHCR commissioned a global review of refugee education, which made a number of recommendations for policy and programming.<sup>11</sup> The review observed that access to education is limited and uneven across regions and displacement settings; that girls, youth and other marginalized groups are disproportionately excluded from schooling; and that refugee education is often of a low quality, and therefore not optimal in terms of its protective capacity.

7. Globally, access to early childhood development (ECD) opportunities for refugee children is very limited. More than 24 per cent of all refugee children between 6 and 11 years of age do not receive primary education. In 21 countries where UNHCR works, there is no access to free primary education for asylum-seekers or refugees. The figures for secondary education are even more critical: with only 36 per cent of refugee children enrolled in secondary schools globally, many adolescents are left idle. They have limited opportunities for personal development and may resort to negative coping strategies.

8. UNHCR has undertaken many initiatives to improve school enrolment and retention, and to promote the achievement of refugee children and young people. In Uganda, for example, a comprehensive approach to refugee education - including constructing accommodation for teachers, equipping schools with instructional materials, providing teacher support, and giving rewards to students, teachers and parent-teacher associations - has reduced teacher turnover and improved student retention and achievement. In other countries, including Kenya and the Syrian Arab Republic, incentives have been put in place for families to send their children to school, with a reward system based on attendance levels. A community-based approach to ECD is being promoted to serve as a broad protection strategy, and refugee mothers and other family members are being educated on the developmental needs and protection of young children. In 2011, UNHCR partnered with the company ‘LEGO’ to bring learning and play materials to seven operations, reaching more than 60,800 pre-school-aged children.

<sup>10</sup> *Field Handbook for the Implementation of UNHCR BID Guidelines*, UNHCR, November 2011, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e4a57d02.html>.

<sup>11</sup> *Refugee Education: A Global Review*, by Sarah Dryden-Peterson, UNHCR, November 2011, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4ebd3dd39.html>.

### III. The way forward

9. UNHCR's recently elaborated Framework for the Protection of Children (or Child Protection Framework) sets out a comprehensive operational strategy to enhance the protection of girls and boys of concern to the Office. The Child Protection Framework has been further strengthened by UNHCR's new Education Strategy (2012-2016),<sup>12</sup> and an updated SGBV strategy.<sup>13</sup> These strategies are complementary and together with the Child Protection Framework provide longer-term direction for UNHCR's engagement in the protection of children under the broader umbrella of the Office's Age, Gender and Diversity Policy.<sup>14</sup>

10. The Child Protection Framework and Education Strategy are based on the principle that States are primarily responsible for the protection of children within their jurisdiction, and for establishing and maintaining national child protection systems to which all children have access regardless of their background. UNHCR supports States in fulfilling their obligations and strengthening national child protection systems, and advocates for non-discriminatory access for all children of concern. At the community level, the Office also helps strengthen the capacity of refugee families to provide protection to their children. Where protection risks emanate from within the community, UNHCR promotes positive attitudinal changes and acts as an advocate for children.

#### A. Framework for the Protection of Children

11. The purpose of the Child Protection Framework is to improve the accessibility, quality and timeliness of protection for all children of concern. It is designed to support operations in developing country-level strategies in a wide range of contexts, and to guide cooperation between UNHCR and its partners. The Child Protection Framework emphasizes the rights of children and the importance of their engagement and participation in decisions affecting their lives and wellbeing. Six goals are established in the Framework, namely that:

- girls and boys are safe where they live, learn and play;
- children's participation and capacity are integral to their protection;
- girls and boys obtain legal documentation;
- girls and boys have access to child-friendly procedures;
- girls and boys with specific needs receive targeted support; and
- girls and boys achieve durable solutions in their best interests.

12. Each child of concern has unique protection needs. Providing customized care and support for these millions of girls and boys is a very challenging task. Pursuant to a call by UNHCR's Executive Committee,<sup>15</sup> UNHCR has developed a "systems approach to the protection of children". The concept of 'child protection systems' is a methodical way of ensuring that all the necessary elements of a protective environment for children are coordinated and complementary and that they operate at both community and national levels. The benefit of a systems approach is that it places the child at the center of focus. Instead of pursuing child protection in a fragmented way, treating each category of children or form of abuse separately, a systems approach takes a comprehensive view of the protection of all boys and girls. The systems approach, which underpins the Child Protection Framework, thus maximizes the impact of protection programming by

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<sup>12</sup> *2012-2016 UNHCR Education Strategy*, 28 February 2012, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4f4cd9812.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Action against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: An Updated Strategy*, UNHCR, June 2011, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e01ffeb2.html>.

<sup>14</sup> *Age, Gender and Diversity Policy*, UNHCR, 8 June 2011, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4def34f6887.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Executive Committee Conclusion No. 107 (LVIII) on Children at Risk, 2007.

ensuring that all children benefit even if they do not fall within a specific at-risk category. In applying the systems approach, UNHCR also promotes the non-discriminatory access of children of concern to national child protection systems.

## B. Education Strategy 2012-2016

13. UNHCR's Education Strategy for 2012-2016 focuses on education for refugee children and young people. In school, children develop confidence and social skills and build social networks that help safeguard their rights and the rights of others. Self-esteem is increased as children build their knowledge and capabilities, cultivating their sense of personal identity and independence, and empowering them. "Soft skills" developed in the classroom as a by-product of learning can give children a lifelong advantage in navigating their physical and social worlds more safely.

14. The Education Strategy reflects a renewed focus on refugee education as a core component of UNHCR's protection and comprehensive solutions mandate. It emphasizes improving access to quality education for refugee children and maximizing the protective benefits of participation in school, recognizing that marginalized groups may need special attention to access safe learning environments. The Strategy also seeks to integrate refugee children into national education systems. It is structured around six objectives, each of which includes key activities, expected results and indicators to measure achievement:

- Improve learning achievement for refugee girls and boys in primary school;
- Ensure that schools are safe learning environments for refugee children and young people;
- Improve access to formal secondary education opportunities for refugee young people;
- Increase access to higher education opportunities for refugee young people;
- Ensure that opportunities for education are lifelong and available to all according to need; and
- Provide access to educational opportunities as early as possible during an emergency.

15. The Education Strategy's objectives are reflected in UNHCR's global target for primary school enrolment, the level of which has recently been revised from *a sustained increase of at least 10% to at least a 65% net enrolment rate*.<sup>16</sup>

## C. Operationalization of the Framework for the Protection of Children and the Education Strategy

16. Priority countries have been selected for the initial operationalization of both the Child Protection Framework<sup>17</sup> and the Education Strategy.<sup>18</sup> UNHCR is supporting these countries to develop their own strategies for child protection through an integrated "systems approach", with additional technical assistance being provided via stand-by partners, to the extent possible. In relation to the Education Strategy, UNHCR is supporting each priority country in developing a multi-year, multi-sectoral educational plan based on the local context and existing programmes. Additional technical assistance

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR Results Based Framework (RBM) 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Mexico, Rwanda, Sudan, Thailand, Uganda, and Yemen.

<sup>18</sup> Bangladesh, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Uganda and Yemen. Additional target countries will be identified throughout 2013-2016.

for education is being provided to UNHCR field offices, and 16 new (national) Education Officer positions are in the process of being created.<sup>19</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

17. The protection of children is not only a legal and social responsibility but also an investment in the future. It is a common effort, requiring the assumption of responsibility at the national level and international support where necessary. As the Executive Committee concluded in 2007, the focus will need to be on the importance of promoting comprehensive child protection systems involving a wide range of stakeholders and overcoming strict legal categorizations. It is hoped that the Child Protection Framework and the Education Strategy will be important building blocks in continued efforts to ensure that children receive the protection and care to which they are entitled. UNHCR looks forward to working closely with States, affected communities, and key partners including UNICEF and non-governmental organizations, to advance this agenda.

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<sup>19</sup> One Education Officer position is located in Headquarters, and a second position is based in UNHCR's Regional Office in Nairobi, Kenya. The remaining 16 positions are located in various UNHCR country offices.