FOR EVERY
CHILD IN
DANGER
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unicef
UNITED KINGDOM

KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE
IN EMERGENCIES

In an increasingly dangerous world, protecting children in emergencies is life-saving and must be prioritised.

In 2015, a devastating earthquake in Nepal, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa and conflicts raging on three continents have put children in terrible danger. Protracted and violent crises in Syria, South Sudan, Iraq and Yemen have trapped children in emergencies of the severest and largest scale. Children have been forced to flee their homes in an attempt to save their lives and their futures – becoming displaced in their own countries, living in refugee camps or making perilous journeys into Europe and other more developed regions.

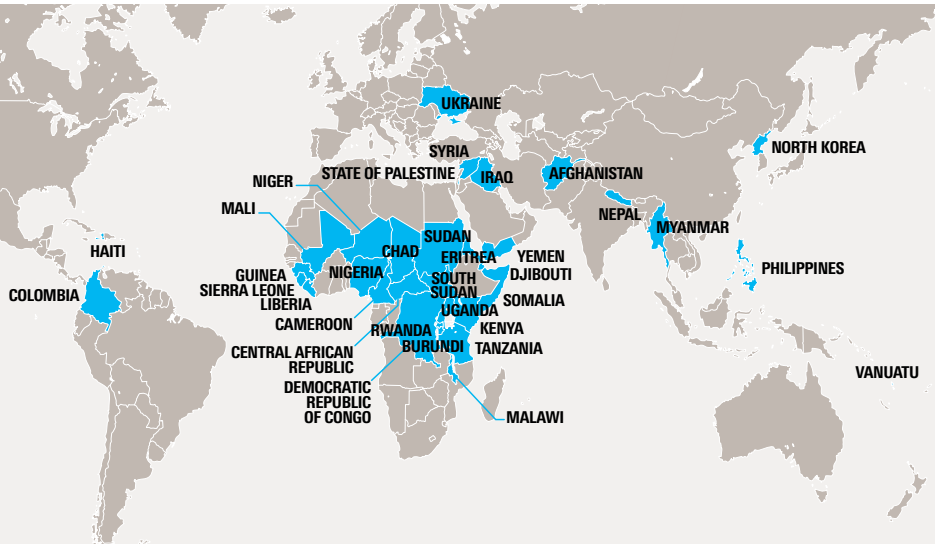Never before has the world needed to respond to so many crises at once. In the wake of emergencies, children urgently require food, clean water, medicine and shelter. They also need life-saving protection from violence, exploitation and abuse.

With the first World Humanitarian Summit imminent in May 2016, now is the time for action. We must seize the opportunity of the Summit, when countries will come together for the first time to forge a new commitment to humanitarian action. The world faces both a pressing need to prioritise the protection of children from violence in emergencies, and now, a potential catalyst for change. This briefing explains why protecting children is essential, before, during and after conflicts and disasters, and why we must ensure that the global humanitarian response is able to meet the increasingly extreme threats to children's safety. It also outlines the immediate steps that the UK Government can take to protect children in emergencies, playing a vital leading role to help keep every child safe.

THE DANGERS CHILDREN FACE

"There is a 'new normal' in the world: the ugly spread of conflicts and violence in every region, against which the capacity of the humanitarian response does not keep pace, despite the efforts of people and governments of good will."

**ANTHONY LAKE,
UNICEF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

UKRAINE
NORTH KOREA
SYRIA
NIGER   STATE OF PALESTINE   IRAQ   AFGHANISTAN
MALI   NEPAL   MYANMAR
HAITI   SUDAN   PHILIPPINES
COLOMBIA   GUINEA   CHAD   ERITREA   YEMEN
SIERRA LEONE   NIGERIA   SOUTH   DJIBOUTI
LIBERIA   SUDAN   SOMALIA
CAMEROON   UGANDA
RWANDA   KENYA   VANUATU
CENTRAL AFRICAN   BURUNDI   TANZANIA
REPUBLIC
DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC
OF CONGO   MALAWI

In 2015, Unicef is working to protect children in emergencies in more than 30 countries.

When an emergency strikes, it is children who are hardest hit. In all crises – whether conflict, disaster, protracted or sudden onset – many children lose their lives, and many more are put in terrible danger. Children lose family members and friends, witness the destruction of their homes and schools, and are forced to flee from all that is familiar to them. Children are threatened not just with uncertainty and insecurity, but with real danger to their physical and emotional wellbeing. It is in times of crisis that children face some of the most extreme threats to their safety and violations of their rights, including bombing and shooting, sexual violence, abduction, displacement and recruitment into armed forces and groups.

One in every ten of the world's children now lives in conflict-affected areas (an estimated 230 million children).[1] **Last year, children made up half or more of those affected by natural disasters (some 50 million children)**.[2]

In 2014, the extremity of violence in armed conflicts led to a dramatic increase in grave violations against children.[3] Some studies predict that child deaths are likely to increase significantly in wars of the future.[4] **The number of people forced to leave their homes has already seen an accelerated increase across the globe**. **In 2014, children**

made up 51 per cent of refugees, the highest proportion for more than a decade.[5]

The number of children affected by disasters is projected to more than triple over the coming decades.[6] A key factor is the growing impact of climate change in triggering prolonged humanitarian crises – increasing the risk of more frequent and extreme weather events and acting as the 'ultimate threat multiplier' in already fragile states.[7]

Yet emergencies not only create new threats to children's safety and wellbeing; they also exacerbate existing ones. Amidst the chaos of war or in the aftermath of disaster, the normal mechanisms that protect children can struggle to cope under the stress of the crisis – heightening the dangers that children face even in times of peace and stability. At home, at school or in their local communities, threats such as early marriage, child labour and trafficking can be magnified and compounded. Focused on the emergency at hand, affected states, donors and humanitarian aid agencies often neglect to adequately address the abuse and exploitation of children.[8] In all crises, the failure to protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect is life-threatening at worst and life-altering at least.

TARGETED BY VIOLENCE

"Some months back, in Beni territory, more than a hundred children but also many men and women were slaughtered, cut into pieces with machetes. So far, no justice has been done. The greatest source of my insecurity is the presence of these armed groups who terrorise our province, the bandits who rape women and even little girls. I am very scared because, at any moment, they may turn up."

LAETITIA, 14, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

There has been an upsurge in violence against civilians in recent years, with research suggesting that there were more wars in 2014 than any other year this century.[9] Children have become more vulnerable due to new tactics and the increasing complexity of warfare, including the diversification of parties to the conflict and an absence of clear battlefields. Last year, unrelenting hostilities and spikes in violence resulted in widespread grave violations against children caught up in armed conflict – in many situations taking place in dense urban environments. This trend has continued into 2015.[10]

As towns and cities increasingly become theatres of war, it is children who bear the brunt of attacks. **The number of child casualties resulting from explosive weapons increased by a third from 2013 to 2014**.[11] In Yemen, since the conflict intensified earlier in 2015, children's lives have been threatened by street fighting, canon shelling, snipers and aerial bombardments. Unicef has confirmed that at least 466 children have been killed – more than four times the number of children killed during the whole of 2014.[12] Children in Yemen are now also at increased risk of injury from mines and other unexploded ordnance.[13] Mines, cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war pose threats during conflict and for years afterwards.

In populated areas, the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects not only kills and injures children, but also damages and destroys safe havens such schools and hospitals. Unicef has identified more than 8,850 schools in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya that can no longer be used because they have been damaged or destroyed, occupied by parties to the conflict or used to shelter displaced families.[14] **Across the world, 34 million children and adolescents are out of school in conflict-affected countries – 70 per cent of these in countries where the crisis is protracted**.[15] In Syria, one in five schoolchildren are forced to cross lines of fire just to take their exams. This is fraught with danger, as the killing, abduction and arbitrary arrest of students and teachers has become commonplace in the region.[16]

For children living in such highly dangerous and unpredictable environments, the long-term damage to their learning, health and emotional wellbeing can be devastating. In Gaza, the stress of the conflict and of living under blockade has left an estimated 300,000 young people in need of psychosocial support; a survey showed an average of 75 per cent of children regularly experienced unusual bedwetting.[17,18] In 2014, Unicef provided 3.1 million children with psychosocial support and access to child-friendly spaces. Yet despite evidence of the importance of psychological support for children, in many conflicts children's emotional wellbeing and recovery is still overlooked. Unremitting anxiety and exposure to violence can undermine children's psychological development, impairing cognitive and sensory growth. It is now largely accepted that exposure to violence can threaten the development of children's brains and lay the foundations for cycles of intergenerational violence.[19]

Children in conflict are victims of violence and witnesses to violence. Moreover, some children are also used to carry out violence – recruited into gangs, armed groups or the state's armed forces. Some children are forcibly recruited; in the last year, abductions are reported to have increased significantly, perpetrated on a wide scale by extremist groups.[20] **In 2014, Unicef secured the release of 10,000 children from armed forces or groups, and helped to reintegrate 8,000 children**. Yet in the Central African Republic, since 2013, between 6,000 and 10,000 children have been connected with the country's armed factions, including child soldiers, those working as messengers or cooks, and children subjected to sexual exploitation.[21] In South Sudan, around 13,000 children have been recruited and are being used by all sides of the conflict, putting their lives at risk and changing their futures forever.[22]

SEPARATED FROM FAMILY

"My father died first on Friday.
I started to cry and I started
to worry. My mum was worrying,
one day she died too. I was all
by myself. My friends told me to
keep courage and forget about what
happened to me. Sometimes it comes
in my heart and sometimes I forget
about it."

WATTA, 11, ORPHANED BY EBOLA, LIBERIA

Conflict and disasters put children's lives in danger, and the commotion of survival and flight often leads to separation from their families and caregivers. Children who are orphaned, abandoned or displaced must confront alone the chaos and danger that often characterises the early stages of a disaster situation. **Children typically represent 50-60 per cent of people hit by natural disasters**, and conflicts increase vulnerability to disasters by destroying basic services, infrastructure and livelihoods, as well as forcing families to move to areas more exposed to hazards.[23, 24] Emergencies can create an environment of lawlessness and impunity in which violence escalates, with displacement and family separation acting as contributing factors.

In all emergencies, the longer a child is separated from his or her family, the more difficult they are to locate and the greater the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. **In 2014, Unicef placed 33,000 unaccompanied and separated children in alternative care, and reunited 12,000 children with their families or caregivers**. Without this protection, unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, illegal adoption, and economic or sexual exploitation. In Nepal, trafficking was rife even before the earthquake in 2015, with girls recruited into prostitution and sold as domestic slaves, and boys taken into forced labour. Immediately after the earthquake, the Nepalese Government suspended international adoption, banned children from travelling without parents or guardians, and suspended the registration of new orphanages. Yet in the following three months, 513 children and women at risk of being trafficked were intercepted by Unicef and partners, and helped to safety.[25]

Separated and unaccompanied children are also vulnerable during health epidemics, where a fear of contagion can exacerbate their isolation. In the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, more than 18,000 children lost one or both of their parents or primary caregivers.[26] Despite clear signs that the Ebola epidemic threatened children's safety, public health interventions to control the outbreak undermined children's protection. School closures and the enforced proximity of family members in quarantine increased the likelihood of domestic abuse. Children in Sierra Leone reported that exploitation and violence against girls had increased, resulting in rising numbers of teenage pregnancies.[27] Unaccompanied and separated children were not systematically identified, capacity for family tracing and reunification did not meet the level of need, and there was little follow-up on the wellbeing of children placed with carers.[28]

Even when separation from parents or caregivers is voluntary, for survival or economic reasons, threats remain for children living or travelling alone. Of all refugees and migrants, unaccompanied children are the most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. In the first nine months of 2015, 10,000 unaccompanied or separated children arrived in Italy and Malta alone.[29] Given the scale and immediacy of the current humanitarian need, providing a home for unaccompanied children must be a priority, through resettlement or relocation schemes designed and implemented in their best interests.

FORCED FROM HOME

"They were bombing us constantly
with missiles and rockets. Life
was too difficult, so we had
to leave. One night my uncle
brought a car to get us out.
It was extremely dangerous and
we were all crying. I have lost
everything. I want to go home."

RAND, 13, SYRIAN REFUGEE, TURKEY

Forced displacement reached unprecedented global levels in 2014, with 59.5 million people forced to flee their homes due to persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. More than 20 million crossed an international border in search of protection, becoming refugees or asylum seekers, while 38 million people were forcibly displaced within their own countries. In 2014 children made up just over half of all refugees around the world – the highest proportion for more than a decade.[30]

There is a common assumption that displacement is short-term and temporary. **Yet research by the International Displacement Monitoring Centre has found that the average amount of time spent living in displacement worldwide is now a staggering 17 years – the length of a childhood**.[31] Many children are forced to move several times during their childhoods and as a result may lose their relatives and community, as well as their possessions and all that they are familiar with.

The stress of living displaced from home hits children hard, as the pressures on their families can lead to an increase in violence, abuse and exploitation. Only a minority of displaced people live in identifiable camps; at least 59 per cent live in urban areas, many in slum-like conditions, facing discrimination on the margins of host communities.[32] In a survey of young Syrian refugees in Jordan, adolescents reported that they did not feel safe or welcome in host communities, particularly in school. The young refugees' perception of being discriminated against, bullying and intimidation were cited among the main triggers for mental health or psychosocial disorders.[33]

Nearly five years into the Syria conflict, families with dwindling resources are also forced to resort to more extreme coping mechanisms that put children at risk. In Lebanon, Unicef has found that children as young as 10 are victims of bonded agricultural labour; in Jordan, close to half of Syrian refugee families report having a child as a breadwinner.[34] In 2014, child marriage was found to have increased alarmingly among Syrian refugee communities and camps in Jordan – as much as doubling in some places.[35] Though camps can shelter children, the absence of privacy and a lack of safe spaces for children can leave them exposed, with girls especially vulnerable to sexual violence.

Nevertheless, in times of crisis, the ability to flee has saved countless children's lives, and preserving the right to seek asylum is essential to protecting children in emergencies. **A total of 190,000 children sought asylum in the European Union between January and September 2015** – comprising a quarter of all asylum seekers and near double the number over the same period in 2014.[36] Many of those seeking refuge in Europe are escaping conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, making perilous journeys that risk forcing children into the hands of traffickers and smugglers. This year, more than 3,000 people have died or gone missing trying to reach Europe, the majority drowning in the Mediterranean Sea.[37] On reaching Europe, many children arrive with only the clothes and shoes they are wearing, living in overcrowded and inadequate conditions or sleeping out in the open air. Already more than 3,000 children per day are arriving at Unicef child-friendly spaces in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and this is expected to increase.[38] Children seeking asylum require adequate protection, including through safe reception facilities with access to healthcare, psychosocial support, recreation and schooling, and trained child welfare specialists to care for and counsel children and their families.

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES IS LIFE-SAVING

In every emergency, there are threats to the safety and wellbeing of children. For this reason, protecting children must be a vital consideration in all humanitarian action – both in responding to a crisis and reducing risks through preparedness. The consequences of failing to protect children can be life-shattering: both in terms of immediate physical and emotional impact and potential long-term psychological damage. If children are not protected, the deep developmental and emotional scars born out of violence can affect their ability to become healthy and emotionally balanced adults as much as any physical injury.[39]

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN THE FIRST RESPONSE TO A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

When an emergency strikes, protecting children as part of the immediate humanitarian response can keep them safe in the midst of conflict and disaster. This action must respond to the specific risks and needs of a particular emergency situation and comprise specific activities carried out by national or community-based actors, as well as by humanitarian staff supporting local capacities.

In the first response to an emergency, urgent interventions by all humanitarian actors to protect children can include:

Supporting orphaned, unaccompanied and separated children including refugee and migrant children, through alternative care, family tracing and family reunification.

Offering safety, relief and learning opportunities for children at protected and inclusive child-friendly spaces and schools, as well as monitoring school enrolment, attendance and drop-out rates.

Safeguarding the emotional and social wellbeing of children through the provision of psychosocial support.

Preventing and tackling the abduction and exploitation of children, including through illegal adoption, child labour and trafficking.

Ending recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, and supporting children's release and lasting reintegration.

Monitoring and reporting on the six grave violations of children's rights:
- ⑤ Killing or maiming of children
- ⑤ Recruitment and use of children by armed forces or armed groups
- ⑤ Rape or other sexual violence against children
- ⑤ Attacks against schools or hospitals
- ⑤ Abduction of children
- ⑤ Denial of humanitarian access to children

PREPAREDNESS BY ALL ACTORS TO STRENGTHEN THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

Humanitarian action to protect children from violence in emergencies also involves preparedness – strengthening the systems, structures and practices that help to keep children safe before, during and after a crisis. This means establishing national and community-based institutions and services, and encouraging positive cultural norms, to reduce risks and increase resilience when a crisis hits. In delivering long-term change, non-traditional actors such as diaspora networks and the private sector have become increasingly involved in providing humanitarian assistance.

The role of business in particular has evolved in recent years, from a support role mainly limited to financial contributions, to more proactive participation. Businesses have an overarching responsibility to ensure their actions do not negatively impact on children's rights. This is heightened in emergencies, when there is an increased risk of funding child soldiers, of child labour taking place within businesses' supply chains and subsidiaries, and of involvement in tax evasion and corruption. The private sector's active involvement before, during and after emergencies is therefore vital, including conducting stringent child rights due diligence when operating in areas affected by conflict or disasters. At an operational level, the private sector can also help protect children through expertise and capacity in developing new technology and innovations.

Longer-term action to protect children through strengthening systems and increasing preparedness can include:

Building the capacity of government, community and social welfare systems that protect children, including identifying and building on existing systems and coordinating with development programming before and after emergencies.

Providing training to non-governmental and state actors about protecting children in emergencies, including social workers, health workers, teachers, prison staff, police and armed forces, as well as international peacekeeping forces.

Promoting the registration of all children at birth, including displaced and refugee children, in order to access health services, social security and education.

Ensuring children and communities in affected areas have access to education about the risk of mines and unexploded ordnance, and are better protected from the effects of explosives and other indiscriminate or illicit weapons.

Generating lasting change in social and cultural norms and behaviour in order to tackle all violence against children in the long term.

Collecting and tracking data, and reporting on the situation for children, including threats and risks.

Promoting the use of standard inter-agency tools and systems to manage cases of vulnerable children.

TIME FOR CHANGE: WHY NOW?

THE URGENT NEED TO PROTECT CHILDREN

33 PER CENT
▶ THE INCREASE IN CHILD CASUALTIES FROM EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS LAST YEAR

34 MILLION
▶ THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WHO ARE OUT OF SCHOOL IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD

17 YEARS
▶ THE AVERAGE AMOUNT OF TIME PEOPLE SPEND LIVING IN DISPLACEMENT

Despite the action already taken to protect children on the frontline of emergencies, there is global recognition that the current humanitarian response is not doing enough to keep children and families safe. Given the scale and urgency of humanitarian need, the world requires better ways to assist the millions of people affected by conflict and disasters, ensuring humanitarian action evolves to keep pace with our changing world. Following an unprecedented number of extreme emergencies in 2015, now is the time for real change.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, the world will come together for the first time to forge a new commitment to humanitarian action – bringing together governments, humanitarian organisations, people affected by humanitarian crises and new partners including the private sector. Focused on keeping humanitarian action fit for the future, the Summit is framed around four key areas:

⑤ reducing vulnerability and managing risk;
⑤ humanitarian effectiveness;
⑤ transformation through innovation; and
⑤ serving the needs of people in conflict.

The challenge of protecting children in emergencies is critical to all four of these themes. **In order for a new humanitarian commitment to transform the lives of future generations, children must be at its heart**.

The UK is one of the world's most generous emergency aid donors, and the first G7 nation to have realised and enshrined in law a commitment to spending 0.7 per cent of national income on aid. The UK has a long and proud history of helping people in times of crisis, evidenced most recently as the second biggest bilateral donor to the Syria region. In recent years, the UK Government has been a leader in pledging its commitment to ending sexual violence against women and girls in conflicts, and has been increasingly engaged in tackling specific forms of violence such as female genital mutilation and child sexual exploitation online. Yet while the UK is taking action for children on many fronts, it also has a duty to protect children from all forms of violence and abuse in humanitarian emergencies.

The first World Humanitarian Summit presents an opportunity for the UK Government to demonstrate leadership in fulfilling its duty to children when they are most in need of protection. Other governments will be looking to the UK as an example. As a permanent member of the Security Council and at a diplomatic level, the UK has the influence to rally support for this issue. The UK Government should seize this opportunity to champion the protection of children, making this a priority at the World Humanitarian Summit and pushing other governments and actors to do the same.

KEY ACTIONS TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE

1. PRIORITISE PROTECTION IN THE FIRST RESPONSE TO EMERGENCIES

Protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation is life-saving in emergencies. Likewise, failing to protect children from these risks can severely undermine progress in responding to and recovering from conflicts and disasters. Protection must therefore be an equally important and immediate priority in the first response as other areas of humanitarian action such as food, emergency shelter and clean water. Yet within the global humanitarian response, action to protect children remains insufficiently prioritised and policies and programmes that keep children safe are not systematically included in all emergency response efforts.

The role that education can play in protecting children immediately after an emergency hits is particularly undervalued. Schools can provide a physical safe space in the midst of conflict or in the aftermath of disaster, in which children can be supervised, kept occupied and protected against the threat of violence, abuse and exploitation. Attending school can also act as a preventative measure against forced labour, abduction or recruitment into armed forces or groups. As a place of learning, schools foster normalcy and hope – offering a critical source of psychological protection for children and helping to reintegrate those who have experienced trauma. Yet in 2014, only 1 per cent of global humanitarian aid went on education.[40] Securing space for an education response in humanitarian appeals and during the first response to rapid-onset emergencies continues to pose significant challenges.

The UK must play a vital role in advocating for the protection of children and education as essential components of the global emergency response. The aim of protecting children from violence and abuse should systematically inform humanitarian planning, decision-making and first response to emergencies. The UK Government can and should take a leading role in making protection a greater priority.

In doing so, it is vital that the UK leaves no child behind; protection must be comprehensive, reaching even the most vulnerable, least visible and hardest-to-reach children. Protection must also be holistic, developing long-term solutions for children and addressing a potentially wide range of needs. Yet the UK currently does not have a strategy for protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse in conflict or disasters, or a focal point to lead this work.

To achieve a joined-up approach, the UK Government must make sure that the importance of protecting children is reflected across UK diplomatic and military actions, humanitarian relief efforts and development work. This should be realised through a comprehensive strategy for protecting children in emergencies spanning four Government departments: the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. Led by a focal point within Government to centralise and oversee the UK's work in this area, a cross-departmental strategic approach would enable the UK to better coordinate its actions and ensure a coherent approach to protecting children in emergencies.

SAFI'S STORY

"My school in Syria closed because of the war," explains 9-year old Safi. "An airplane dropped a barrel bomb on our school. I was hurt when they dropped another bomb and got shrapnel in my face and back." Safi and his family fled to Turkey, where they now live in a host community. Safi is healing from his injuries but his face still bears a scar. Though it frightens some of his friends, he can play safely and is now attending school. Currently in Grade 2, Safi's favourite subject is spelling. He dreams of becoming a doctor: "I want to help people who are affected by the war and save their lives."

2. STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS AND REDUCE RISKS TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE

Protection of children shouldn't start or end with a crisis. Outside of an emergency, efforts to strengthen the protection of children will build resilience, increasing children's safety and wellbeing if a crisis strikes or as it subsides. Strengthening these systems takes time. It often requires changing behavioural norms within families and communities, as well as developing services and a social welfare workforce with the capacity and competency to prevent and respond to violence. Even though families and communities are often strained during crises, in many cases preserving and bolstering these support networks is highly effective in helping to keep children safe.

SAPANA'S STORY

"My father always made me feel very unworthy," says Sapana*. "I had to show my worth by leaving school to earn money." She was 13 years old when she went to work in a carpet factory in Kathmandu, labouring for 16 hours a day in brutal conditions. When Nepal was struck by an earthquake in 2015, the factory collapsed and escape seemed easy. Sapana was befriended by a man who said there were hotel jobs on the Nepal-India border. But arriving there, she started to panic. "I was about to make a horrible mistake due to my desperate situation," she recalls. Her nervousness was noticed by a team of border-monitors working in partnership with Unicef, who gave Sapana shelter in protective custody. She provided information to help rescue other underage workers at the factory: "I nearly fell into a trap. But at least I am safe now. That makes me happy."

*name changed to protect the identity of the child

It is therefore essential to strengthen the systems that protect children before and after crises. While relief efforts must always be grounded in the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, this long-term change should bridge the gap between relief and development work to achieve long-term solutions for children. For the UK, this means that protecting children in emergencies should be considered in the wider context of UK action to end all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and trafficking – a commitment made under Target 16.2 within the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals. As part of implementing this target, the UK should join a global partnership to end violence against children – leading as a pathfinder country to mobilise resources and political will, as well as to improve policy and programmes in both the UK and internationally. The partnership and its associated trust fund will help to foster mutual learning between partners, supporting the strengthening of systems and deployment of innovative strategies to protect children from violence. As a leading humanitarian donor, the UK should ensure that this includes protection in emergency settings in particular.

As an immediate step, the UK should look to make sure that children fleeing humanitarian crises can seek refuge safely. In the current refugee crisis, this should start with continuing and reinforcing the UK contribution to search and rescue operations on sea and land – systems that protect children who are already on a perilous journey. Beyond the welcome expansion of a resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees in the UK, the UK Government should also set up systems that enable children and their families fleeing conflict and persecution to access legal alternative avenues to reach safety. This would reduce the risk of them being forced into the hands of traffickers and smugglers. Keeping families together would also help to reduce this risk. The UK Government should therefore widen existing family reunion rules to allow refugee children to join not just parents but also other relatives in the UK, and allow refugees to apply for humanitarian visas at UK embassies in countries of origin and transit.

In the context of natural disasters, strengthening the systems that protect children must be considered an integral element of wider risk reduction. Building communities' resilience and preparedness not only saves lives and speeds up response, but is also significantly more cost-effective than dealing with the consequences after an emergency hits. The UK Government must better align and coordinate its humanitarian approach and operations with other key interventions – specifically in the areas of disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and broader sustainable development policies, programmes and investments. By taking a more holistic approach that better reflects the interconnected nature of threats facing children, the UK can facilitate more integrated solutions, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

3. ADOPT AND ENFORCE INTERNATIONAL LAWS AND STANDARDS TO PROTECT CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

International laws already exist to protect children in emergencies: international humanitarian law that protects civilians in armed conflict; international human rights law conferring obligations on states to respect, protect and fulfil human rights; and international refugee law to protect people recognised as refugees and seeking asylum from persecution. What is often lacking is the political will to apply and enforce these laws vigorously. The world has seen that developing international laws and standards can lead to the stigmatisation of practices that destroy children's lives and to changes in behaviour. For example, before the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the use of landmines and cluster munitions was an accepted military practice by many armed forces and groups. There has now been a reduction in the use of these indiscriminate weapons (the UK has abandoned the use of cluster munitions) and governments and armed groups tend to deny their use due to stigma. Progress towards changing attitudes and the application of good practice is possible in other areas, through the adoption and enforcement of international laws and standards, and by filling gaps in existing laws.

BOTO'S STORY

"When they take the bullet out I will feel safe," says 15-year old Boto*, who was shot in the neck while fighting with the Cobra Faction in South Sudan. Once a model student, Boto left school when the conflict broke out, was forced to work and then abducted by soldiers: "We went to fight. Many died – adults and children. I lost friends. We had to fetch water. We were beaten."

After two years, Boto managed to run away, and found safety through the United Nations mission in South Sudan. With the help of Unicef, Boto was reunited with his family. He has since had medical treatment to remove the bullet and has returned to school. "Going to school makes me feel safe. I want to be a doctor and help many people."

*name changed to protect the identity of the child

As a member of the UN Security Council and within the European Union, the UK is in a position to champion the rights of children affected by armed conflict, with the ability to influence international debate, strengthen key mechanisms to enforce international law and hold others to account. **The UK can provide political and financial support for the following:**

i. Strengthening the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)

In 2005 the UN established the MRM in an attempt to end impunity for those who commit grave violations against children in armed conflicts. This is managed by country-based task forces (co-led by Unicef) and the most senior UN representative in the country. Using this information, every year the UN Secretary-General lists the names of armed forces or groups that commit grave violations against children. Putting the MRM into practice can be challenging due to restrictions on access in conflict settings as well as lack of resources. Nevertheless, the UK should raise concerns about grave violations against children through the Security Council Working Group on Children Affected by Armed Conflict and use platforms such as the UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict to push for a more intensive and coordinated response. Naming perpetrators publicly can be a powerful tool, and the UK should also apply pressure to governments and armed groups that commit grave violations against children.

ii. Supporting action plans to end the recruitment and use of children as soldiers

As part of the MRM, Unicef liaises with government forces and rebel groups perpetrating grave violations against children to develop action plans to end and prevent these violations from taking place. An action plan is a written, signed commitment between the UN and those parties who are listed as having committed grave violations against children. Each action plan outlines concrete, time-bound steps that lead to compliance with international law and de-listing, leading to a more protected future for children. To date, 23 listed parties have signed action plans, yet only nine parties have fully complied with their action plan and have subsequently been removed from the UN's list. Currently seven national security forces are listed for recruitment and use of children: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen. To succeed, action plans require ongoing political commitment from other governments such as the UK, as well as financial support.

iii. Protecting children through peacekeeping and armed forces

The UK Government should press for the protection of children to be included in peacekeeping operation mandates, as well as the inclusion of child protection advisers in peacekeeping operations. The UK's active involvement in making sure that UN peacekeeping forces are trained to protect children's safety and wellbeing is also essential – as evidenced by past support for the development of new training materials specifically on protecting children for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations.[41] The UK can play a crucial role in ensuring that this training is extended to armed forces, judiciary and police, through its support for security sector reform in developing countries. This support should include a requirement for training on the protection of children, as well as due diligence requirements to ensure children are not recruited, and that vetting takes place to ensure recruits have not been perpetrators of human rights abuses, including violations against children.

In addition to supporting mechanisms for enforcing international law, the UK Government can also strengthen its own work in protecting children affected by armed conflict:

iv. Protecting schools and universities from military use

Schools are under attack: a significant pattern of attacks on schools, universities, students and staff has been identified in 30 countries, with 1,000 attacks in Afghanistan, Colombia, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Syria alone between 2009 and 2013.[42] Armed groups and even government military forces are often attracted by the location, solid structure and ready-made facilities of schools and universities. As a result, these sites are occupied as military bases or weapons caches, often for weeks, months and even years. Children may then been seen as associated with the occupying force, making them potential targets. Children's access to education is also inevitably denied or reduced. As a result of the increase in attacks on educational facilities, Guidelines have been developed on Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict. The UK has not yet committed to implement the Guidelines through adopting the Safe Schools Declaration, and is urged to do so.

v. Use of explosive weapons in populated areas

When explosive weapons with wide area effects are used in populated areas, the impacts on civilians, including children, are devastating. In recent years, international recognition of this as a fundamental humanitarian issue has grown and momentum is now building to address it. The UN Secretary-General and more than 40 states have raised concern about this practice. A number of expert meetings have brought together states, UN agencies and civil society to discuss the potential for a political commitment to heighten civilian protection from this practice. The UK should actively participate in these current global efforts. More widely, all parties to conflicts globally must stop the use of these weapons in populated areas due to the predictable harm caused to civilians through death, injury and damage to vital infrastructure.

4. DATA AND INVESTMENT: RESOURCING THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

In emergencies the threat of violence that children face is too often ignored because it is not counted, with a widespread failure to collect and collate evidence. Most countries do not report the number of children who have been murdered, and this lack of data collection is even more common for other forms of violence. New indicators to track progress against the new Sustainable Development Goals are a positive move forward, but protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation also relies on data collection in humanitarian settings. The UK must continue to champion the data revolution and support the collection of data – particularly disaggregated data – on all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation of children, even in times of disaster or conflict.

The UK Government should also look to collect data on and critically assess its support for protecting children through UK programmes and strategic partnership agreements, as well as levels of funding. Currently, given a dearth of data, there is in turn a lack of evidence on the extent, impact and effectiveness of programmes to protect children and the negative effects of under-investment.[43] A report commissioned by the Global Protection Cluster previously found that whilst humanitarian funding had increased overall, child protection remained the least funded sector in emergencies alongside education. In the most recent year for which detailed analysis was available (2009), investment to protect children accounted for just 0.7 per cent of all funding – only a third of what was required to keep children safe.[44]

As funding is tight in the context of so many concurrent humanitarian emergencies, it is particularly important to be able to identify what is being spent on protecting children. A marker to classify all outputs, projects or funding relating to children would enable the UK to track work on this basis, followed by actively monitoring whether programming is addressing children's needs.[45] This evidence base should then be used to ensure that the Government is adequately investing in programmes that are proven to keep children safe in times of crisis.

IN BRIEF: WHAT THE UK GOVERNMENT MUST DO

1. Prioritise protection and education in the first response to emergencies

⑤ The UK should prioritise protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse – including through education – as an essential component of the emergency response.

⑤ The UK should advocate for protection and education at the World Humanitarian Summit, pushing for agreements and outcomes from the Summit that keep children safe.

⑤ The UK should develop a cross-departmental strategy for protecting children in emergencies, spanning the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office.

⑤ The UK should appoint a focal point within Government to coordinate and oversee the UK's work in protecting children in emergencies.

2. Strengthen systems and reduce risks to keep children safe

⑤ The UK should lead as a pathfinder country in joining a new global partnership to end violence against children.

⑤ The UK should better align and coordinate its humanitarian operations with policies, programmes and investments in disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and sustainable development, including the development of robust child protection systems.

⑤ The UK should strengthen systems that protect children fleeing humanitarian crises, including continuing and reinforcing its contribution to search and rescue operations.

⑤ The UK should widen existing family reunion rules for refugee children and allow refugees to apply for humanitarian visas in UK embassies in countries of origin and transit.

3. Adopt and enforce international laws and standards to protect children in conflict

⑤ The UK should use its role within the UN and the EU to call for a more intensive and coordinated response to grave violations against children, including applying pressure to governments and armed groups that commit them.

⑤ The UK should provide political and financial support for the implementation of action plans agreed by the UN with armed forces or groups to address grave violations against children, particularly the recruitment of children.

⑤ The UK should push to include protecting children within peacekeeping operations' mandates and for the inclusion of child protection advisers in peacekeeping operations. The UK should also support training for peacekeeping forces on the protection of children; as well as training for armed forces, police and judiciary as a requirement of UK support for security sector reform in developing countries, alongside human rights due diligence.

⑤ The UK should endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and implement the Guidelines on Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

⑤ The UK should engage with other states, UN agencies and civil society on the development of a political commitment on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

4. Data and investment: resourcing the protection of children

⑤ The UK should continue to champion the data revolution and support the collection of reliable and adequate data on violence against children in emergencies.

⑤ The UK should implement a whole-of-system child marker for humanitarian programming.

⑤ The UK should track and monitor its funding for child protection in emergencies, and identify and plug funding gaps.

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