



**CHILD PROTECTION**

**unicef** 

## SITUATION

Children from poor families in Cambodia are highly vulnerable, often facing daily threats to their health, education, safety and overall development. Every day in Cambodia, children are exposed to abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect. These issues are often exacerbated by gender inequity, marginalization of urban and rural poor, and negative attitudes and discrimination towards ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

Cambodia's child protection services remain weak, under-funded and under-staffed. NGOs fill some gaps, providing much-needed services and follow-up support for children, but their coverage is typically limited and coordination and oversight by the Government is inadequate to the need. Gaps in Cambodia's social safety nets and welfare services often lead parents to resort to negative coping strategies, such as unsafe migration, abandonment and placement of children in residential care.

Lack of family and social support lead many children and young people to live on the streets and has resulted in increasing levels of adolescent risk behaviours including drug abuse, gang violence and involvement in criminal activities.

The justice system in Cambodia is still emerging and ill-equipped to respond to the needs of children who come into contact with the law whether as victims, witnesses or offenders. Inadequate judicial and law-enforcement contribute to the problem of violence, exploitation and abuse of both boys and girls in Cambodia.

Despite the nation's success in controlling the HIV epidemic, HIV has tightened its grip on the nation's most vulnerable and marginalized populations, which include more women, children and young people. A potential 'second wave' of new infections among key populations, such as people who use drugs, men who have sex with men and entertainment workers, threatens to undermine the nation's progress in controlling HIV and AIDS. Young people under the age of 24 within these groups are among those most at risk. To achieve more coherent results for children, young people and their families, UNICEF has integrated its HIV prevention, care and support efforts into its child protection programme.

Every child has the right to be protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. UNICEF supports the government to strengthen child protection systems to protect vulnerable girls, boys, women and families, including children with disabilities and those affected by HIV and AIDS, and to address social norms to enhance the protective role of families and communities.





### KEY PARTNERSHIPS IN CHILD PROTECTION

UNICEF's main government partners in child protection are:

- Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Interior
- Ministry of Women's Affairs
- Ministry of Cult and Religion
- National AIDS Authority

UNICEF contributes to national coordination efforts in child protection and HIV through its participation in the National Multi-sectoral Task Force on Orphans and Vulnerable Children, the Government-NGO Working Group on Child Justice, the Technical Working Group on Mine Action, the Joint Government-Development Partner Technical Working Group on HIV, and the Joint UN team on HIV and AIDS.

UNICEF also maintains strong collaboration with other UN agencies including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as local and international NGOs, the media, parliamentarians and academic institutions.

## A SYSTEM'S BUILDING APPROACH

Over the past few years, UNICEF has started moving towards a systems approach to child protection. While efforts focused on individual issues, such as child labour or child trafficking, have produced substantial benefits, the approach has often resulted in fragmented child protection responses and failure to address underlying structural issues.

Many children face multiple protection problems, rather than just one, and the fact that different risks are usually interlinked means that vulnerability in one area often leads to increased vulnerability in others. Focusing on one particular issue has sometimes resolved that issue while leaving the root causes untouched.

A systems approach promotes a holistic view of children and child protection that engages the full range of actors involved in protecting children's rights. The approach is accompanied by a shift from mainly investing in responding to child protection concerns to a greater emphasis on preventing violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation from happening in the first place. By doing so, it provides a more cohesive, sustainable and cost-effective way to address child protection, resulting in longer-term, more sustainable impacts for children.

### WHAT IS A CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM?

A child protection system is 'a set of laws, policies, regulations, services and capacities needed across all sectors – especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice – to support prevention and response to protection-related risks' (UNICEF Child Protection Strategy, 2008).



## BUILDING A CHILD SENSITIVE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM

Cambodia's swift economic rise and fall in recent years has placed new pressure on families, with children among the most acutely impacted. More children are migrating to urban areas in search of work and an escape from poverty, yet they frequently encounter new burdens in the city. Although an economic boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s created more jobs for young people, the recent global financial crisis has seen many jobs vanish, increasing insecurity for children.

Children are most severely affected by social and economic shifts, where a collision of social problems including unemployment, family break-ups, and an erosion of traditional values has left more children vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

Children are being abused and exploited for labour and sex both in Cambodia and neighbouring countries, putting them also at risk of HIV infection. Each year more than 500 cases of sexual exploitation, rape and trafficking are reported to police. Closer to home, children are equally vulnerable to psychological and physical abuse, including corporal punishment in the home and in schools, and sexual abuse. Rape is the most commonly reported offence committed against women and children.

Meanwhile, as families grapple with poverty, many are abandoning traditional values that prioritize family- and community-based care and leaving their children instead to grow up in residential care facilities – a trend that has contributed to a rapidly increasing and largely unregulated residential care industry in Cambodia. While more than 11,900 children are living in residential care, an estimated 72 per cent have at least one living parent. These children are unnecessarily separated from their parents – the most protective safeguard in the life of a child.

The absence of strong and effective social protection and justice systems deepens negative impacts on children. Due to shame, stigma and trauma, children who are rescued from abusive and exploitative situations often face tremendous difficulties reintegrating into their families and communities. Yet services to prevent violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect, as well as rehabilitate vulnerable and victimized children are fragmented, inadequate, under-funded and under-staffed. Cambodia has only one district social worker per 25,000 people, and most lack resources and skills to prevent, assist and refer cases of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect, significantly compromising quality of case management and support. NGOs fill some gaps but coverage is often limited and heavily concentrated in and around the largest urban areas.

UNICEF strengthens the protective environment for children by advocating and supporting the government to develop a social welfare system that is child and gender sensitive and deliver accessible quality services to vulnerable children and their families.

## WHAT WE DO

- Support the government to strengthen social welfare policies, plans of action and regulations to address disparities, and implement them effectively, particularly the alternative care policy, re-integration of victims of violence, exploitation and abuse, and the national action plan to eliminate the worse forms of child labour.
- Strengthen national and local capacities to oversee, regulate, and deliver child protection and social welfare services to promote and support family preservation and respond to violations of child protection rights.
- Support the government to develop a monitoring and evaluation system that covers key child protection issues and provides accurate data on vulnerable children.
- Advocate for the government to increase budgets allocated to social welfare and child protection.
- Support the government and other partners to strengthen systems to monitor and report violations of child protection rights and to develop independent complaints mechanisms.
- Strengthen child protection coordination efforts at the regional, national and subnational levels.
- Support the government and NGOs to develop new models of alternative care, family support and other protection and social welfare services for vulnerable children and their families.
- Increase the number of professional social workers providing support to children in need.
- Build on our experience with social service mapping at the local level to ensure that vulnerable children, youth, and families are identified and referred to appropriate services.
- Carry out advocacy and research, and provide technical support to partners to integrate HIV prevention among most at risk adolescents into child protection system building efforts.
- Promote participation of vulnerable children and young people in national policy and strategy dialogues.

## IMPACT

Accurate data on vulnerable children and child protection issues in Cambodia are increasingly available to policy makers, helping to ensure that real issues are addressed through national child protection laws, guidelines and strategies. Cambodian children are prevented from 'falling through the cracks' through closer collaboration between government, providers of health and welfare services, academic institutions, NGOs, community-based organizations, faith based initiatives and other civil society partners, as well as UNICEF and other UN agencies. Children and families at risk and victims of violence and exploitation have increasing access to appropriate care, HIV prevention and protection services.





## STRENGTHENING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM FOR CHILDREN

Cambodia is now at peace and making steady progress in its development efforts. Yet its capacity to protect children who come into contact with the law is among the least developed in the region. With only 296 judges and prosecutors, many of whom have still not received legal training, and 500 lawyers for the entire country, progress remains slow and challenging.

Limited job prospects for the almost half a million young people who enter the work force each year propel many children into illegal and exploitative labour, where they become victims of crime. Meanwhile, a lack of family and social support drive many children to live on the streets and to increasing levels of adolescent risk behaviours such as drug abuse, sex work, gang violence and involvement in criminal activities.

As a result, more children are coming into conflict with the nascent criminal justice system, where the number of minors in detention is gradually growing each year. In 2009, an estimated 826 children were in detention across the country, compared to 630 and 493 children in 2007 and 2006, respectively.

Children who come into contact with the law as victims, witnesses or offenders find themselves in a justice system that is ill-equipped to respond to their needs. Limited laws and low capacity among criminal justice authorities to handle cases involving children, in addition to a cultural context in which crime is narrowly viewed with a focus on retribution and punishment, rather than restorative justice, only amplifies vulnerabilities for children.

Children in detention are frequently sentenced as adults and the vast majority never meet with a lawyer before their trial. They are generally held in adult prisons with limited or no access to rehabilitation or educational support. Approximately half of them are being held on pre-trial detention, often beyond the legal limit of two months. Behind bars, these children face poor living conditions and are susceptible to violence and abuse, including sexual abuse and exploitation.

As diversion of children in conflict with the law is not provided for, the current system does not encourage the use of alternatives to imprisonment. As for recovery and reintegration of children who are in conflict with the law, the system lacks specialized trained staff available for case management of the children.

UNICEF promotes the building of partnerships to develop a child-friendly justice system that prioritizes and addresses children's needs as victims, witnesses or offenders. UNICEF coordinates with a range of donors, UN agencies, embassies, and non-governmental organizations who work together to support the Cambodian government to establish a justice system for children that prioritizes and respects children's rights.

## WHAT WE DO

- Strengthen government capacities and structures at the national and local levels to coordinate, refer, and deliver services for children in contact with the law.
- Strengthen monitoring and reporting of children within the justice system.
- Assist the government to build the capacity of police, lawyers, prosecutors, judges and social workers to support children in contact with the law.
- Support the government to adopt and advance the draft Juvenile Justice Law and other legislation related to child protection and their enforcement mechanisms.
- Advocate for diversion and restorative justice for children in conflict with the law.
- Strengthen and expand community-based programmes and mechanisms for prevention, diversion, and restorative justice for children at-risk and in conflict with the law.
- Support the government to enhance its performance in reporting on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, its two Optional Protocols, and other international treaties related to child protection, and effectively respond to concluding observations.

## IMPACT

Children in contact with the law are increasingly protected by Cambodia's criminal justice system in accordance with international standards. More children in contact with the law have their rights respected as a result of broader and better regulations, including a draft Juvenile Justice Law, and training and awareness among key stakeholders in child justice issues.

Around 300 child victims of abuse and exploitation annually have been rescued and assisted by trained specialist police in all provinces. More than 230 judges and prosecutors in all provinces have been trained in international standards on justice for children and child sensitivity in the courtroom, and more than 1,000 at-risk youth and children involved in petty offences have received life skills training and social service support that diverted them away from delinquency and from the formal justice system. Improved case management, rehabilitation and reintegration have reached nearly all children in government-run youth rehabilitation centres and correction facilities in four provinces.

## STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY AND FAMILY-BASED MECHANISMS TO PROTECT AND CARE FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

An estimated 1.5 million orphans and vulnerable children are living in Cambodia, with up to 20,000 of them living or working on the streets of Phnom Penh. Some of these children are victims of forced labour and trafficking while others suffer from violence or abuse or are living with disabilities. Others – an estimated 85,921 children – are vulnerable due to HIV. In 2010, approximately 11,945 children lived in residential care – the last stop for children whose families have been devastated by poverty or whose parents have died.

For orphans and vulnerable children, HIV and AIDS can significantly change their lives. Almost 2 per cent of Cambodia's children have lost their parents to an AIDS-related illness or are living in an AIDS-affected household. Many more children are left in vulnerable situations due to HIV.

Limited financial resources and even fewer social safety nets exist to support orphans and vulnerable children, including children affected by HIV and AIDS. Inadequate oversight at orphanages combined with an alternative care policy that lacks proper implementation has left many vulnerable children without proper care and with little hope to improve their lives.

UNICEF works with the government to ensure that vulnerable children and their families have the necessary support to help children realize their rights to a safe, supportive environment in which to grow up.

### WHAT WE DO

- Promote successful models at the local level to increase the coverage of support, care and protection for vulnerable children and their families with a special focus on female headed households.
- Support the government to develop and coordinate long-term societal behaviour change campaigns to address key child protection issues, such as violence against children, safe migration, birth registration and protection/diversion of children in conflict with the law.
- Support the empowerment of children, young people, families, communities, and service providers with the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours required to replace a culture of silence with intolerance to violence and abuse.
- Work with the government and civil society, including faith-based initiatives, to develop models to provide quality care and support to help families care for vulnerable children.
- Promote access of vulnerable children and their caregivers to essential services, including social protection programmes.
- Strengthen the integration of faith-based approaches to care and support for families affected by HIV with national social protection efforts to protect vulnerable families and children from economic and other shocks.
- Assist local government to provide vulnerable children in need of alternative care, including children affected by HIV and AIDS, with access to safe and appropriate alternative care options.
- Support the government to improve coordination, linkages and referral among social, health, education and community-based services at the local level, in line with local governance reform and the national social protection strategy.



### IMPACT

In 2007, the government adopted a national plan of action on orphans and vulnerable children and established task forces at the national and provincial levels, strengthening partnerships between the government, UN agencies and NGOs. Efforts like these are helping to alleviate the risks and vulnerabilities that orphans and vulnerable children face, including children living with disabilities and children affected by HIV and AIDS.

National and provincial government and non-government partners, along with religious stakeholders, implemented a large-scale care and support programme for people living with HIV and their children. In 2010 alone, nearly 5,000 adults living with HIV and 3,358 children affected by HIV received spiritual, material and cash support from Buddhist monks in half of the nation's provinces. More communities are starting to take the initiative in caring for orphans and vulnerable children, including those impacted by HIV and AIDS. Today, 70 per cent of the nation's communes have at least one organization that provides HIV and AIDS-related care and support to families with orphans and vulnerable children.

## HIV PREVENTION AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The HIV epidemic breaches boundaries of gender, geography, race, religion and age to impact everyone and threaten families and communities. Risks multiply in urban settings, especially for Cambodia's young people and those in socially marginalized groups such as drug users, sex workers and men who have sex with men.

A 2010 survey on young people most at risk of HIV, carried out by the Government with UNICEF support, revealed that alcohol use was high among young people – 70 per cent among young women and 91 per cent among young men – and both female and male participants had used illicit drugs. While almost 14 per cent of sexually active females reported they had used drugs, only 0.4 per cent who had never had sex reported using drugs. Moreover, while more than 41 per cent of male and 23 per cent of female participants were sexually active, condom use with boyfriends or girlfriends was alarmingly low – 31 per cent among females and 58 per cent among males. There are strong interactions between all of these risk behaviours, with low use of health services and HIV prevention programmes.

Although the government has taken important steps in containing the spread of HIV, the national prevention programme is fragmented, and the overlapping risks and vulnerabilities affecting most at risk populations urgently need to be addressed. A potential resurgence of the epidemic among most at risk populations, particularly involving adolescents and young people, is raising new concern.

Evolving cultural norms add a new layer of danger for young people. Dating and sex before marriage among the nation's youth have replaced the traditional practice of arranged marriage. Lack of education and awareness about risks of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases leaves many young couples to engage in unsafe sex.

UNICEF supports the government to improve access to and use of HIV-related information and services for Cambodia's young people, using targeted, comprehensive and rights based approaches to prevent the spread of HIV.



## WHAT WE DO

- Support the government and civil society organizations to expand coverage and quality of age-appropriate information, skills and services to most at risk young people.
- Advocate for improved national data on key populations at higher risk of HIV to be broken down by age and sex.
- Support the expansion of targeted HIV communication efforts, including active promotion of information about prevention of mother-to-child transmission, voluntary and confidential counselling and testing sites, and sexually transmitted infection facilities to promote positive health-seeking behaviours among those most at risk.
- Support the development of innovative interventions with most at risk young people, addressing overlapping risk behaviours such as drug use, low levels of condom use, multiple concurrent sexual partners and low rates of treatment for sexually transmitted infections and HIV testing.
- With UN partners, advocate for a policy environment that enables practical and integrated services for young people most at risk in urban "hotspot" areas.
- Support local NGOs to offer age-appropriate harm reduction programmes for young people who use drugs through drop-in centre and outreach services.
- Support government and civil society partners to develop comprehensive policies and strategies which protect adolescents and young people most at risk of HIV and violence, exploitation and abuse.
- Develop cost effective demonstration programmes which combine child protection strategies geared towards higher risk young populations, with HIV prevention, treatment and care efforts.

## IMPACT

More young people have correct knowledge of HIV and AIDS as a result of 12 new workplace committees that provide HIV and AIDS education, reaching 5,114 young female workers through peer education by the end of 2010. An additional 82,423 workers were reached through general health promotion sessions. In tandem, the Inthanou (HIV and AIDS information) hotline has provided young people with ongoing HIV support and information, answering more than 60,000 calls per year with roughly 60 per cent of those calls from young people. A national survey on young people most at risk yielded important results which were used to inform national plans and strategies.

Targeted prevention efforts with young people engaging in high-risk behaviours reached over 8,630 drug users, including 4,599 females, in the Phnom Penh area in 2010. Furthermore, HIV life skills education is now fully integrated into the government's Child-Friendly Schools programme, reaching 47,530 young students at Grade 5 level in 521 primary schools in Prey Veng province. The approach was adopted as a model for the country under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and was rolled out to 13 other provinces with support from development partners. Important new research on young women and men in the entertainment industry has commenced.



**UNICEF CAMBODIA**

P.O. Box 176, Phnom Penh

Tel: +855 (0)23 426 214

e-mail: [phnompenh@unicef.org](mailto:phnompenh@unicef.org)

**[www.unicef.org/cambodia](http://www.unicef.org/cambodia)**