

Forum on Minority Issues
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UNICEF presentation “The Potential Role of Social protection in Enhancing the Economic Rights of Minority Children”

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Mr. President, Mme Chair, Ms McDougall, Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today representing UNICEF in the Third Session of the Forum on Minority Issues.

My presentation reflects UNICEF’s equity focus. We believe that to achieve the MDGs and other internationally agreed development goals, we need to invest in inclusive development reaching the bottom quintile; those who are most marginalized and socially excluded in the societies. Social protection is an important strategy for achieving this.

Children face multiple sources of vulnerability, some of which are child specific or intensified by childhood:

Worldwide children are more likely to be poor than any other age group. In the “developing” world 40% of children - 600 million children – live with less than one dollar per day. In OECD countries poverty rates range from 2.6% in Sweden to 26.2% in Mexico of children living below the national relative poverty line. For comparison, in the USA the figure is 22.4 %.

Children are unable to claim their rights. Due to their dependence on adults for mobility, legal, economic and other matters, children cannot directly claim entitlements or rights and access services. For example in countries with HIV prevalence children can have difficulties in accessing benefits when their caretaker is sick, or when there are legal barriers to claiming benefits by someone other than parent.

Children of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities can also face intersecting and complex forms of discrimination for example on the basis of gender or disability. When these factors intersect, they tend to have multiplying effects limiting access to services. Discrimination and exclusion based on ethnicity can be a significant source of vulnerability for children. Social protection measures can help reduce and address children’s multiple vulnerabilities. I should underline that Social protection is not THE answer to address children’s vulnerability, but it can help.

What do we mean by social protection?

UNICEF's working definition is: "the set of public policies and programmes aimed at reducing the economic and social vulnerability of children, women and families in order to ensure their access to a decent standard of living and essential services".

Persons of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities are at risk of being marginalized in a social services environment that is demand driven unless special features are integrated into programme design. Therefore UNICEF's approach to social protection is to focus on improving access. This is particularly important for minorities who can face additional social and economic barriers to service use. Particular attention needs to be given to overcoming multiple barriers.

I would like to underline that social protection is not only about reducing economic vulnerabilities, but also social vulnerabilities, such as discrimination, which can be particularly important in the case of minorities.

In simple terms, it is not enough to build schools or train doctors and nurses. What needs to take front stage is ensuring that individuals have access to these services, including the knowledge that the services exist, and the means to claim them. These means would include for example transportation, legal institutions, and non-discriminatory environment. This is particularly relevant not only for children whose access to social protection often depends on another person, but also for minorities.

Social protection can provide an avenue for strengthening interventions and guarantees in education, health, nutrition and protection from violence, abuse and neglect.

Challenges continue though: we need to develop appropriate instruments to ensure that services reach the intended population and the interventions are sustainable.

We also need to recognize and protect traditional forms of social protection, especially extended family structures, which have traditionally constituted a buffer against different shocks. In many regions however we have witnessed a decline in these traditional forms of social protection due to urbanization, migration and poverty.

I would like now to refer to two case studies, one on minorities in Vietnam and another one on Roma in Hungary.

Poverty, food insecurity and low educational attainment among adults are heavily concentrated among minorities in Vietnam. In 2003 Health Care Funds for the poor were introduced as part of Vietnam's compulsory health insurance system. The funds covered 18% of the population including the poor ethnic minorities in mountainous areas. This has led to increased utilization of health care services. Household out-of-pocket spending was reduced

by 20 per cent. It also led to over 80% increase in the use of in-patient services by the beneficiaries.

In Hungary, a great majority of the poor are not Roma, despite popular belief. Only about 20 % of the poor households are Roma. However 85 % of Roma are in the bottom income quintile. Poverty among the Roma is concentrated, deep and largely unalleviated by social security. 60 % of Roma are unemployed opposed to 40 % of other poor people despite making greater efforts to find employment.

The question is why social protection has not had the desired impact on the Roma. Some possible reasons are the fact that social policies in the form of tax allowances are not beneficial to Roma children given that tax allowances favour households with active earners and the Roma suffer from high unemployment. This exceptionally high unemployment also reduces opportunities for accessing employment related pensions. The researchers are suggesting that poverty should be dealt with as a social and economic issue, not a minority or ethnic issue, given that the majority of the poor are not Roma. Nonetheless there are a few particularities that suggest that the characteristics of the Roma should be taken into account in the design of any social protection policy.

An appropriate design of social protection programmes is essential. In order to ensure child-sensitive social protection, eligibility determinations should be based on the needs of families (or households) rather than individuals.

A minimum level of benefits, which would be enough to lift a family out of poverty, should be established. The minimum level should be reviewed and updated regularly. In establishing the social minimum, housing costs should be considered separately from other family expenditures because they differ greatly among poor families due to regional and local variations in housing markets.

In conclusion,

Social protection can have important socio-economic benefits for minority children: Social protection reduces income poverty and inequality, and increases consumption of basic goods in the short term.

Social protection contributes to economic empowerment over the long run and prevents risky and poverty-reinforcing behaviours related to poverty. Social protection also combats social exclusion.

It is important to consider the particular vulnerabilities faced by minorities when designing a social protection programme. It should be minority-sensitive, but not minority-exclusive. It is important to ensure that the design or implementation of social protection does not contribute to further reinforcing negative public attitudes and stereotypes and thus does not work against the objective of social inclusion.

This is an under-researched topic. There is much more analysis to be done on how social protection affects minority children and what policies and approaches are effective in different contexts.

The disparities in child survival, development and protection point to a simple truth: the MDGs and other international commitments to children can only be fully realized, both to the letter and in the spirit of the Millennium Declaration and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, through greater emphasis on equity among and within regions and countries.

I would like to end by quoting the words of UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake during the MDG Summit earlier this year: "We can't be satisfied with opportunity for anyone until there is opportunity for everyone."