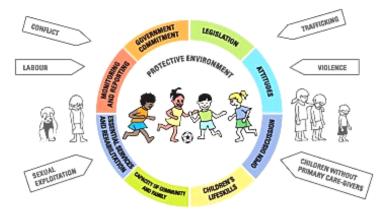## Child Protection: Children without Parental Care

> **Human Rights:** Children have the right, recognized by the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989)**, to the love, care and protection that family provides. Children who cannot be raised by their own families need an appropriate alternative family environment, while institutional care should be used only as a last resort and temporary measure.

Millions of children around the world live in institutions, formal or informal foster care, or are otherwise separated from their parents. Many more are at risk of separation, due to the impact of HIV/AIDS, armed conflict, disability, poverty and social breakdown. Children without parental care – in institutions, living with relatives or in foster families - find themselves at a higher risk of exploitation, abuse and neglect, and their well-being is often insufficiently monitored. Children may be placed in institutions unnecessarily and for too long. An inadequate care environment can impair a child's emotional and social development, and leave children extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse and physical violence. These risks are even higher when children find themselves without any form of care or separated from their families in situations of emergency or armed conflict.

Facts and Figures:

- In Central and Eastern Europe alone, about 1.5 million children live in public care, 900,000 of them in institutions;[1]
- In sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the total number of orphans (children under the age of 18 who have lost one or both parents) is 143 million; of those children, an estimated 15 million have been orphaned by AIDS, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa;[2]
- The total number of orphans is largest in Asia – 80 million in 2003.[3]

BUILDING A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT for children who are separated or at risk of separation from their parents:

Government commitment is needed to help prevent separation through extended child welfare services and poverty reduction initiatives. Governments must support family-based alternatives to institutional care through appropriate policies, funding and legislation. Meanwhile, it is necessary to ensure adequate regulation and monitoring of remaining institutions for children in public care, in line with agreed national and international standards and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Legislation and enforcement: Laws must protect children from unnecessary separation from their families. Children without parental care need to be protected from discrimination, violence and abuse and should have full access to education and health care. Inheritance laws must not discriminate against girls, nor children who have lost a parent to HIV/AIDS.

---

[1] TransMonee Database, UNICEF Innocenti Research Center, Florence.
[2] UNAIDS, UNICEF and USAIDS, *Children on the Brink 2004,* Population, Health and Nutrition Project for USAID, Washington .C. July 2004
[3] Ibid.

Attitudes, customs and practices: Discrimination based on gender, disability, ethnicity or HIV status, which contributes to children being institutionalized, must end. Positive attitudes to domestic adoption and well-monitored foster care can ensure that children who cannot be cared for by their families still grow up in a family environment.

Open discussion: The media can help dispel myths about the benefits of institutional care and educate the public about domestic adoption, foster care and respect for a child's right to grow up in a family environment.

Children's life skills, knowledge and participation are crucial, particularly when parental care is not available. Children should be provided with opportunities to express their views and wishes with regard to their care arrangements. They need to be aware of their rights and helped to protect themselves from exploitation, abuse, and the dangers of trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

Capacity of families and communities: Community-based social services, such as day care, parenting education and home support for children with disabilities are needed to strengthen the capacity of families to care for their children and of extended families and communities to provide alternative forms of care.

Monitoring and reporting both help to provide both oversight and a record of the well-being of children in institutions, as well as those in foster care. They are important in the effort to change public attitudes, promote better practices and increase accountability.

> **Millennium Development Goals**: Families struggling in poverty may place their children in institutions of public care, where their access to quality education is likely to be poor. Children separated from their mother at an early age, especially if they remain in institutional settings for long periods of time, are at greater risk of early death. (MDG1/2/4)

Examples of UNICEF in action around the world:

- In **Armenia**, UNICEF and its partners helped prevent the institutionalization of children living and working on the streets by promoting family reintegration and providing assistance, such as vocational training, to children and their families.

- In the **Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**, UNICEF assisted the government in establishing support services to prevent institutionalization of children. This included drafting a national strategy that was adopted by the government, developing a programme for registering children at risk and monitoring their development and status, a social mobilization campaign, and the opening of day-care centres for children with learning disabilities.

- In **Malawi**, UNICEF supported a project that provided training and capital to initiate income-generating activities for 480 guardians of orphaned children. The guardians in turn ensured that the children in their care were supported to go to school and did not have to resort to child labour. The management of the fund is entrusted to the village AIDS committees.

- In **Romania**, UNICEF supported comprehensive social welfare reform. To prevent child abandonment, it provided counseling and material support for 765 pregnant women and mothers in difficult circumstances to enable them to keep their babies. Support for foster families and family-like homes has helped keep some children out of institutions.

- In **Zambia**, UNICEF supports a national network of non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations that reach over 150,000 orphans and vulnerable children. Through these support networks, members receive information and training on income-generating activities, record-keeping and monitoring skills, as well as exchanging experiences.