Panel Discussion on Rights of the Child in Nigeria

Presented by Samuel Momanyi, Deputy Representative, UNICEF Nigeria

Protocol

It is great honor to be among many friends and colleagues today, in order to commemorate an occasion of such significance to me and to my Office.

I am also extremely delighted that a joint committee of National Human Rights Commission and foreign embassies in Abuja has chosen “child rights” as a subject of debate to mark 2013 International Human Rights Day.

**SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria has experienced strong economic growth over recent decades. Ironically, at the same time the country has also seen extremely high and rapid increases in the poverty rate: 54% of the population live in poverty (i.e. less than USD $1.25 per day), which has doubled over the past twenty years[[1]](#footnote-1). It looks like growth in country’s economic terms has not been fully translated into well-being of its people.

And yet, the country has taken some important steps towards promoting and protecting the rights of children in Nigeria, and progresses have been noted.

In the past few years, Nigeria acceded to several human rights instruments including Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and the Optional Protocol to CRC on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As of today, the Child Rights Act (2003) has been promulgated into law in 24 of the country’s 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory.

In recent years, chances of survival and healthy growth for Nigerian children have also improved. For instance, Under-five mortality fell from 201 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2003 to 124 per 1,000 in 2011, while infant mortality fell from 100 to 78 per 1,000. Routine immunization levels increased from 18% in 2006 to 53% in 2010[[2]](#footnote-2). Child nutrition has improved; in 2011, 36% of children under five were stunted and 10% wasted, compared with 41 and 14 % in 2008, respectively. Nigeria is on track to achieve MDG6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases).

Children have also gained significantly from the progresses made in education sector: Primary school enrolment rate has increased from 81.1% in 2004 to 88.8% in 2008 and the number of boys and girls enrolled in junior secondary school (JSS) increased from 2.9 million in 2006 to 5.0 million in 2010[[3]](#footnote-3).

**ADDRESSING DISPARITIES AND INEQUITY**

However, not all children in Nigeria have benefitted from those gains and progresses that the country is enjoying. There are very wide disparities among population – and unfortunately, we do not see much indication that those gaps are being closed….

For instance, the recent bottleneck analysis of education in Nigeria conducted by UNICEF illustrates alarming level of disparities in education sector: The average number of years of schooling in Nigeria is 6.6 years- when this is further disaggregated by gender and wealth quintile, rich urban boys have over 10 years of schooling, whereas poor rural girls have only 1.3 years. When considering ethnic background of children, poor rural Hausa girls only have 0.3 years as the average number of years of schooling! And they are all Nigerian children – but their experience in “Access to Education” is so different and diverse that they might as well be from different countries!

Similarly, the profiles of children without birth registration highlight some key inequities: In terms of geography, Birth Registration rates are approximately 2 times lower in northern zones than in southern zones. Similarly, Birth Registration rates for children in rural areas are 2-3 times lower compared to children in urban areas. Registration rates are up to 7 times lower for children in poor families, compared to rich families. Children in the poorest families have Birth Registration rates of less than 10%. As household wealth increases, there is a steady increase in Birth Registration levels. Children in the richest families have Registration rates of 50-70%[[4]](#footnote-4).

Regional and rural-urban differentials in poverty are also very high. Northern regions experience the greatest poverty, the northeast most of all, where close to 80% of the population lives in poverty. With over 60% of the population below 18, children are disproportionately represented in poor households[[5]](#footnote-5).

With increasing disparities and a concurrent threat of instability, children in Nigeria continue paying a high toll due to their vulnerabilities and coping capacities.

**EMERGING FACTORS**

Nigeria is a dynamic country and going through rapid changes – those changes could pose both opportunities and threats to children. There are several key emerging factors that will significantly impact welfare of children and families. I would like to list a few…

**Insecurity and violence** are major obstacles to development and state-building in Nigeria- affecting many Nigerian, including children. Lives and assets are being lost or destroyed, population is displaced, basic services are disrupted in many contest communities, especially in North East. Human rights challenges in the current security environment have become increasingly sensitive and difficult to address. Access to affected communities and population is increasingly difficult for local human rights actors, and the exact number of children affected is often not available.

Nigeria is a country with youthful population - Nigeria has a population of 169 million, of whom 45% are below 15 years. Youth populations will continue growing for several decades in Nigeria and economic pressure of **youth demography** will remain. The World Development Report (2011) issued by World Bank shows that youth unemployment is consistently cited in citizen perception surveys as a motive for joining both rebel movements and urban gangs[[6]](#footnote-6). Considering the recent global economic downturn as well as the on-going security situation, economic pressures of youth demography may become even more severe in some parts of the country: how to keep the growing number of young people to be able to feed themselves and keep themselves ‘*out of trouble*’, especially in this ‘*difficult*’ time is a big question!

Nigeria has more large cities and the highest total urban population of any sub-Saharan African country. Megalopolises in Nigeria continue to grow. **Urbanization**, driven by the lack of economic opportunities in rural areas, is transforming Nigeria, and placing massive burdens on cities’ already-frail infrastructures to provide basic services for their new residents. The available statistics suggest that close to 77% of Nigerian city dwellers are living in urban slums[[7]](#footnote-7) which are sometimes regarded illegal and target of demolition or eviction. Migrants are often poor, unskilled, facing an uncertain future, and without the support and social protection of families and communities. Even in a big city like Lagos, opportunities for decent employment are limited and competition is fierce. So people— including children— are forced to work for meagre wages, often in unsafe conditions. Exploitation and abuse— including trafficking and sexual abuse— are real risks for many working children in the streets.

A quick overview of the present situation suggests that risks are evolving, with new threats and challenges arising within and across the border. A task of making sure that every child **thrives, learns and stays safe** is enormous!!

**UNICEF’S RESPONSE – WAY FORWARD**

Taking note of the changing environment and situation of the rights of children in Nigeria, UNICEF, together with our government and civil society partners, has been preparing a new country programme 2014-2017.

The overall goal of our new country programme is to accelerate the realization of the rights of **all** children to survival, development, protection and participation. Guided by equity-focus approach, we will intensify our effort to reduce disparities and to realize rights of disadvantaged children. Whilst the programme is country-wide, it will focus on the States and LGAs which have the highest disparities and worst child development indicators.

We must refocus in order to achieve UNIVERSAL realization of the rights of children – ALL boys and girls in Nigeria!

We recognize investment in the most vulnerable and bringing programmes closer to people require wider partnerships with civil society and closer ‘pact’ with communities. The ability of community leaders and civil society to advocate for greater societal cohesion for better protection and promotion of children’s rights is as critical as institutions like rules, laws, and organizations.

With this believe, I am standing here in front of you, inviting all to join me to reaffirm our commitment to realization of the dignity and rights of all children in Nigeria.

As late Nelson Mandela, one of the greatest human rights advocates of our time once said, “We owe our children—the most vulnerable citizens in any society—**a life free from violence and fear**.” Without that freedom, children will not be able to aspire to anything else.

Please join me in the effort to face this unprecedented challenge of making “the equity and social justice a reality for every child in Nigeria” - our collective journey has started!

Thank you.

1. ODI. 2011. Social protection in Nigeria: Mapping programmes and their effectiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. National Immunization Coverage Survey 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria. Nigeria: Digest of Education Statistics (2006 – 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Source: MICS 2007, DHS 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ODI. 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. World Bank. 2011. World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. UN Habitat. 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)