Child Protection: Taking action against all forms of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation

“... violence committed against a single child is one instance of violence too many.”
In May 2009, Save the Children launched the global Child Protection Initiative to strengthen children’s right to be protected from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.

By 2015, we aim to have improved the lives of 21 million children through preventative and remedial child protection measures.

In the initial stage of our Child Protection Initiative, we will be focusing on two priority areas:

- **Children without appropriate care:** including neglected and/or abused children in their families, children in institutions or other forms of alternative care, and children on the move, including child refugees, child migrants and trafficked children

- **Child protection in emergencies,** including sexual violence, children associated with armed forces and groups, and family separation.

In 2011, child labour is likely to become a third priority area.

**Save the Children definitions**

**Child protection** – measures and structures to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children

**Children without appropriate care** – children who are not receiving suitable, continuous and quality care, nurture and guidance at a physical, emotional, social and psychological level from either their families or from other primary carers that are meant to replace the family environment and are responsible for their well being and development

**Children on the move** – children moving for a variety of reasons, voluntarily or involuntarily, within or between countries, with or without their parents or other primary caregivers, and whose movement might place them at risk (or at an increased risk) of inadequate care, economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence

**Child protection in emergencies** – the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation of and violence against children in emergencies.1 An emergency is defined as ‘a situation where lives, physical and mental wellbeing, or development opportunities for children are threatened as a result of armed conflict, disaster or the breakdown of social or legal order, and where local capacity to cope is exceeded or inadequate’.
Protecting children – a universal obligation

Children have an absolute right to be safe. Yet girls and boys in every country, in every culture and at every social level face forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.\(^2\)

These violations include sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking, physical and humiliating punishment, harmful traditional practices (including early marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting) and recruitment into armed forces and groups.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), other human rights conventions, treaties and national laws, governments have a legal obligation to protect children. But all adults share a responsibility to do so.

Parents are primarily responsible for the upbringing and development of their children and, together with their family and community, have a key role to play in protecting them.
The scale and impact of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence

“...I was 12 when I was raped for the first time. On my way back from the market, I walked across the school yard... The school warden took me inside the [class]room and raped me. He threatened to kill my mother and me if I told someone.”

Catherine,* 14, Kaduna state, Nigeria

For millions of children, abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence takes place on a daily basis — at home, at school, in institutions, at work and in the community (see page 4). The social acceptance of some forms of violence, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination and economic factors such as poverty, also put children at risk. During armed conflict and in the aftermath of disaster, children are particularly vulnerable.

The exact scale of violence is unknown, partly because children are often too afraid and too vulnerable to report it themselves. Some forms of violence are socially accepted, while others are illegal. But even those that are illegal are often ignored, hidden or denied.3

Violence and abuse seriously affects every aspect of a child’s development. Overcoming its effects can be a lifelong task. Without support, it may be impossible.

In 1996, the Graça Machel study4 revealed the horrific impact of armed conflict on children.5 And in 2006, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro’s Study on violence against children exposed the shocking scale of violence experienced by children in their everyday life. These studies have set clear global agendas for action to put an end to all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against all children.
Forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence

The appalling facts**

150 million girls and 73 million boys worldwide are raped or subject to sexual violence each year.6

115 million children are involved in hazardous work.7

1.2 million children are trafficked every year.8

8 million children around the world are living in care institutions. At least 80% have one or both parents alive.10

3 million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation every year.9

Just over 1 billion children – including 300,000 under-fives – live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict.12

175 million children are likely to be affected every year by natural disasters.11

Over the next decade, 175 million children are likely to be affected every year by natural disasters.11

More than 250,000 children have been coerced or induced into armed forces or groups to serve as child soldiers.13

In the last decade, an estimated 20 million children have been forced to flee their homes, and more than 1 million have been orphaned or separated from their families by an emergency.14

** The full scale of violence and abuse of children is unknown as much of it goes unreported. These figures are therefore likely to be underestimates.
Armed conflict
Violence against children is often used as a tactic of war. Children are recruited into armed groups, and killed, maimed, abused and exploited in the most appalling ways. They may be forced to observe or take part in atrocities, including against their own families and communities. They are often profoundly disturbed by what they have experienced.

Girls are forcibly taken as ‘wives’ and raped repeatedly. Many suffer horrendous injuries and reproductive health problems, including unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

Armed conflict causes significant psychological and long-term harm to children.

Increasingly frequent disasters
During emergencies, children are often separated from their parents. They are vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, including rape and forced prostitution, physical harm, psychological distress, and economic exploitation, such as forced labour.¹⁵

Children without appropriate care
Children end up in residential care institutions because their families are too poor to look after them and lack adequate support. HIV and AIDS, and the increasing number of disasters, along with ongoing conflict in many countries, mean that more children are being placed in institutions. Many arrive having spent much of their lives without a home and on the street.

Institutions cut children off from their families and communities. Many are unregulated and unsafe, leaving children vulnerable to neglect and abuse.¹⁶ Children under the age of three are particularly at risk of being permanently damaged as a result of not being cared for in a family setting.¹⁷

Children on the move
Children leave home to get work or an education; to escape conflict, a disaster or family violence; or because they are trafficked. Sometimes they move with their parents and relatives; many are alone.

Children and young people on the move – especially those who are on their own – are at risk of sexual violence, being trafficked and of being forced into hazardous and exploitative work.

“All the children were frightened of going to the front, but they had no choice. They were sent forward while the adults stayed behind. If we refused, we’d be killed… In my battalion there were six girls. All of them were sexually violated.”

Christophe, ¹⁷, abducted by an armed group in eastern DRC

“Once I went to the toilet without knowing it was time for the head count. When I came back the supervisor hit my head against the wall many times.”

(Child in an institution, Mongolia)¹⁸
Our approach

**Children’s rights**
Save the Children’s approach is based on every child’s non-negotiable right to be protected and to be cared for – ideally by their family or in a family setting. They are not victims in need of assistance, but rights-holders who are entitled to respect.

**National child protection systems**
A rights-based national child protection system recognises the State’s responsibility and human rights obligations to children and provides governments with a coordinated and sustainable way to protect children. A good system is made up of a set of laws and policies; a central government coordination mechanism with a clear mandate; effective regulation and monitoring at all levels; a committed, competent workforce; and child-friendly, non-discriminatory services, accessible to all children.

Children and other members of society should be involved in developing and monitoring the system. And it must be connected with and support informal community mechanisms that are better placed to recognise problems and respond to them quickly, such as extended family, friends and neighbours, and religious and cultural networks.

Countries with strong child protection systems are better able to cope with and recover from conflict and disasters such as earthquakes and floods. Such systems should, therefore, be an integral part of emergency preparedness planning and disaster risk reduction, and include provision for working at a sub-national and cross-border levels.

**Children without appropriate care**
Generally, children are best cared for by their families or in family-based settings in their community. Save the Children will therefore work with governments and invest in projects designed to prevent care problems arising, and to protect and care for children in family, community or institutional settings. This includes projects for children whose parents/family are either deceased, chronically ill, incapacitated, or unable or unwilling to care for their children because of poverty or discrimination, as well as children separated from their parents and family for other reasons.

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**Indonesia: changing children’s care and protection**
Indonesia has 8,000 childcare institutions housing about 500,000 children. Thanks to Save the Children’s advocacy and programming, the government has shifted its support from institutions to family-based care. It has set up a database on children in alternative care, and has directed all district authorities to monitor their childcare institutions. Save the Children is supporting the national school of social work in preventing institutionalisation and supporting family reintegration, and social work training is being shifted to prioritise family support.
**Children on the move**
Save the Children aims to prevent the ‘worst forms of movement’, increase children’s choices and improve their access to services, support and opportunities. This includes working in children’s home communities to reduce vulnerability to exploitation, abuse and violence, and ensuring that when children do move, they do so more safely. Children in transit and those who have arrived at their destination need advice, practical support and interim care. Decisions about whether they are supported to remain in their new community or to return home are made in the best interests of each child and in consultation with them.

**Save the Children’s goal:** By 2015, 16.5 million children without appropriate care including children on the move will benefit from quality care and protection interventions.

**Child protection in emergencies**
Save the Children will invest in programmes that focus on protecting children from recruitment into armed forces and groups, preventing sexual violence and abuse, and keeping families together.

**Save the Children’s goal:** By 2015, 4.5 million children affected by armed conflict and disaster are protected from abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect through quality preventative and remedial interventions.

**Children and armed groups and forces**
The best protection is to prevent children being recruited or abducted. This requires a concerted approach locally, nationally and internationally to tackle both the immediate and root causes of recruitment.

Save the Children’s work with children who have been associated with armed forces or groups for special support to be part of an inclusive community-based approach that supports all children who have been affected by the conflict.

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**Jacinto’s journey**
Jacinto,* 17, left Guinea Bissau to escape internal conflict and clashes between Guinea and Senegal. After a long and arduous journey through the desert, he was detained twice in Libya. Eventually he got a boat to the Italian island of Lampedusa, but was unable to tell his story until he met a Save the Children member of staff who spoke Portuguese. He told her why he had left Guinea Bissau, and about his fears and the dangers he had faced on his journey. He said he wanted to seek asylum, so the worker informed him of his rights as a separated foreign child and explained what would happen when he was transferred to the mainland.

Eventually, Jacinto was placed in a residential care facility in Sicily and lodged an asylum application.

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**Uganda: reintegrating young mothers and vulnerable girls**
A Save the Children project in northern Uganda provides young mothers and vulnerable girls returning from the Lord’s Resistance Army with support and services. By building up support networks with their peers and helping them gain access to local services, they are less likely to have to earn a living through commercial sex.
Reuniting children with their families

In the chaos of emergencies, children are often separated from their families and particularly vulnerable. It is therefore vital to reunite them with their parents or usual carers as soon as possible. Some require interim care and protection while their families are being traced. Wherever possible, Save the Children ensures that this takes place in foster care families or in group homes rather than in institutions.

Sexual violence in emergencies

In conflict situations and during emergencies, children are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. Distribution systems should therefore be structured to reach particularly vulnerable groups – such as separated children and child-headed households – so that they are not forced to engage in exploitative behaviour in order to survive. In conflict situations, all staff, peacekeepers and officials should be trained in children’s rights, gender sensitivity and the humanitarian code of conduct. Children and their communities should be made aware of their rights, and a reporting structure set up.

There are many examples of girls and boys taking action and advocating for change. In line with our commitment to children’s rights, Save the Children will continue to support children’s own efforts to fight against abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.

Haiti: reuniting children with their families

Even before the huge earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010, thousands of children were separated from their families. More than 250,000 were working as domestic servants and over 350,000 were living in institutions. It is impossible to calculate how many more were separated from their families in the earthquake.

Immediately after the earthquake, Save the Children worked with the government, UNICEF and other NGOs to register children and trace families. We are still supporting the government to register separated or unaccompanied children, as well as ensuring that children born since the earthquake are not lost while waiting for the registration system to be back in place.

Child-friendly spaces in Lebanon

As part of our response to the 2006 crisis in Lebanon, Save the Children set up child-friendly spaces where children could play and learn in safety. Because the conflict left much unexploded ordnance, especially cluster bombs, staff introduced landmine awareness into the curricula.

Côte d’Ivoire: children tackle sexual violence

During a project to involve children and young people in programmes to tackle sexual violence against children, we held a three-day workshop with children’s groups from different provinces. During the workshop, children crafted messages targeting families, friends, policy-makers and care-givers. Those messages were later broadcast several times on the main national television channel and radio networks.

One of the messages was to the country’s president: “In Côte d’Ivoire, we children, the hope of tomorrow, are victims of sexual violence. This causes serious damage to our lives. We want a decree to severely punish these criminals.”

“Since joining this group, I have been advocating in schools to stop the abusive language towards girls and women.”

16-year-old boy, India
More information
http://www.savethechildren.net

or contact Lena Karlsson, Director of Save the Children’s Child Protection Initiative, at lena.karlsson@rb.se

Notes
*All names have been changed to protect identities.

Cover quotation:
Children at the UNICEF and Malian government’s Regional Consultation on Violence against Children in West and Central Africa (2005)
1 This definition was adopted by the Global Child Protection Sub-Cluster Working Group at its January 2010 meeting.
2 In this brochure the terms violence, abuse and exploitation are used individually to encompass abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.
3 Save the Children (2006) Betrayal of Trust
6 Ibid, p. 12
7 International Labour Organization (2010) Accelerating Action against Child Labour, p. 5
8 See note 7, p. 12
9 Ibid
10 Save the Children (2009) Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions, pp. 3, 5
11 Save the Children (2007) Legacy of Disasters
16 K Browne (2009) The Risk of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care, Save the Children UK and the Better Care Network
17 Save the Children (2009) Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions: Why we should be investing in family-based care
18 Ibid
19 B Bell, A Rough Guide to Child Protection Systems, Save the Children (unpublished draft)
20 Save the Children (2009) Keeping Children Out of Harmful Institutions: Why we should be investing in family-based care, p. 19
21 Save the Children (2010) Child Soldiers – and other children used by armed forces and groups, Policy brief
23 Harmful Institutions: Why we should be investing in family-based care, p. 19

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Save the Children Vision and Mission

WE ARE the world's leading independent organisation for children.

OUR VISION is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation.

OUR MISSION is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives.