

72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly
The Moral Imperative High Level Forum on “Protecting Children at Risk within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals”

18 September 2017, 2 to 4 p.m., Church Center for the United Nations, 2nd Floor Conference Room

Concept Paper

Background

The Moral Imperative Initiative (MI) brings together Faith-Inspired Organizations (FIOs) under the convening of the World Bank Group to respond to the global challenge of ending extreme poverty and accelerating progress to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The MI focuses on: strengthening the evidence-base around the role and impact of faith-inspired organizations in advancing the SDGs; enhancing FBO and religious advocacy in SDG implementation and accountability; and fostering more effective collaboration between faith-inspired actors and the World Bank Group (WBG), UN system, and bilateral development partners.

The Moral Imperative started as an initiative incubated by the World Bank Group through the creation and launch of the “Ending Extreme Poverty: A Moral and Spiritual Imperative” statement. Later a growing coalition of FBOs translated the statement into a “Faith-Based Action Framework to End Extreme Poverty and Realize the SDGs”, which was launched at a High-Level Event that took place just before the 2015 UNGA co-organized by FBOs, the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development and the World Bank Group. Assistant Secretary General Thomas Gass delivered remarks at the event representing former Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon along with remarks by Mr. Mahmoud Mohieldin, WBG Senior Vice President. In 2016, the Moral Imperative organized a public forum just before the UNGA on the role of religious organizations in responding to the forced displacement and refugee crisis.

What follows is a concept note for a High-Level Forum co-organized by Faith-based Organizations active in the Moral Imperative focused on the theme of “Protecting Children at Risk within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals”

Objectives of the High Level Forum

The broad objectives of the Forum are to:

1. Generate a shared understanding on the protection of children at risk of violence, abuse, premature death, stunting, etc. in the context and framework of the SDGs;
2. Identify faith-inspired pathways to scaling up protection for children at risk, working in collaboration with the UN, World Bank and other development actors;
3. Highlight the positive impact and courses of successful action by faith-based organizations and faith communities towards the protection of children at risk;
4. Provide a forum where participants can share experiences, explore synergies, collaborations, programming, and follow up actions.
5. Strengthen the evidence base for FBO activity and contributions to protection of children at risk and plan to communicate it to policy makers and practitioners

Target and Format of the High Level Forum

The 2-hour Forum will comprise a high-level keynote speech, plenary discussions, participant presentations and Question-and-Answers. Participants will be from a cross-section of faith-based/ faith-inspired organisations, regional bodies, the diplomatic community, civil society, practitioners, government officials and UN and World Bank officials. The event will take place just before the 71st UN General Assembly in New York.

Why a focus on “at risk” children (Children at Risk)?

The world has more than 7 billion people of whom 2.2 billion are children. Three quarters of these children, and growing, live in Asia and Africa. Hundreds of millions of these children face the grimmest of life situations and are at risk of unbearable harm with immediate, intermediate and longer term consequences for their life outcomes or well-being.

Normatively “at risk” implies exposure or vulnerability to factors or conditions that lead to poor or negative life outcomes whether immediate or in the future. Risk factors are numerous and may include:

- The prospect or actual lack of parental care - An estimated 151 million children worldwide have lost one or both parents, 10% of whom, at least 13 million, have lost both parents.
- Poverty - According to UNICEF, over 570 million children live below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day.
- Poor health status, including maiming or disability of the parents, predisposing children to loss of parental care. Upwards of 20 million children, of whom 15 million are in Sub-Sahara Africa, have been orphaned as a result of HIV/AIDS.
- Social cultural practices, including migration, lone parenthood, family breakdown, divorce and remarriage, child marriage, female genital mutilation, boy preference, teenage pregnancy, gender inequalities the inferior status of women, social, economic or other exclusion, etc.
- Violence, including psychological, physical or sexual violence, or neglect. Violence against children includes all forms of physical, sexual and mental violence, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, harm or abuse, including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labor, cyber abuse and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. Violence affects over one billion children every year and is estimated to cost up to US\$7 trillion annually (8% of global GDP).
- Economic and political factors, including state collapse or failure, civil war and armed conflict, etc., which may lead or contribute to the displacement of populations, the death of parents, loss of economic opportunity.
- Religious and other identity-based ideology, including, the rise of extremist ideology, discrimination and conflict based on identity.
- Natural disasters – can contribute to loss of parents, displacement, loss of economic activity, loss of social support systems and other capital.

While there has been an assumption that poverty is the single largest risk factor for vulnerability, in reality, a combination of factors are interlinked and work together.

How Does This Relate to Ending Extreme Poverty and Realizing the SDGs?

The SDGs present a promising and comprehensive framework for addressing risk to children’s well-being. Collectively, the 17 SDGs emphasize a concern for human dignity and well-being, including children’s dignity and well-being, which is at the very core of development. Within the ambit of the SDG framework, significant innovation is needed in order to most appropriately assign resources. While individual goals may speak to broad ambitions and a set of indicators to deliver to children, it will be important that actors urgently map critical pathways to alleviate children’s vulnerability. This forum seeks to explore, among others, how best to reflect the reality of children at risk within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals and within the individual and collective agency of governments, faith leaders, and actors in international development.

What Do We Mean by Protection?

What does it mean to protect a child “at risk”? At sub-national, national, and regional levels; protecting children “at risk” often requires policy and legislative work committing governments and states to secure the best outcomes for children. Many countries have specific mandates and laws in relation to child poverty and welfare, including violence. What are their experiences and what we can learn from this?

Within states, much of the work to protect children is carried out by a combination of state agencies and governmental departments as well as non-state actors, all of whom often work without strategic collaboration or coordination.

In all situations, it will be necessary to isolate what works and what does not, to establish policy and legal mandates, to create state and non-state infrastructure, to state services and political arrangements. Many will find that new innovations are needed in core services, programmes and interventions reaching out to children.

At all levels, it will be necessary to consider the presence of protective factors- those that work to mitigate and eradicate underlying conditions such as poverty and, crucially those actors that can offer critical interventions to “at risk” children.

For many, efforts at adequate child protection will come down to resources. While policy and legislative reform may reduce the need overall, the actual work of child protection needs lots of “boots on the ground”- community level organizations that have effective reach to children, which often requires additional resources.

Key challenges to taking forward the protection of “at risk” children

Significant challenges and thus opportunities exist in embracing the concept of protecting “at risk” children within the context of Sustainable Development Goals. The challenges include:

- Identifying appropriate measures for risk and risk drivers (including appropriate indicators)
- Determining the interdependence of base conditions/risk drivers
- Identifying “at risk” populations – including the sourcing of reliable population data
- Retooling on-going and future children services, policy and legislative mandates

The Role of Faith Communities and Religious Organizations

Faith communities have long been involved in development work and its landscape. The SDGs clearly provide a sound platform for faith communities to engage in action, including advocacy and implementation towards the realisation of a world free of violence against children. While some of these interventions and approaches by faith communities are well documented and available for learning, evidence-based advocacy and further action; a great deal remains undocumented and is only available through dialogue with the respective faith communities and their leaders. On the other hand, some faith communities promulgate norms, traditions and perceptions that may perpetuate violence against children.

The event will provide a space for interfaith and cross-sectoral dialogue, reflection and learning. It will form a convergence point to identify ideas for effective interventions. And it will contribute to the systematic evidence base on activity and contributions of FBOs towards preventing violence against children

Expected Outcome

The Event is expected to have the following main outcomes:

- a. Enhance Learning and Sharing: Increased understanding and appreciation of the need to protect children at risk- within the context of the SDGs framework as well as enhanced understanding and shared learning about effective methods for preventing, reducing and ending violence against children;
- b. Sharpen focus on qualitative and quantitative evidence for faith-based organizations’ activities and contributions to protection of children, and on approaches to communicating that evidence
- c. Build Shared Commitment to Action: Greater commitment to mitigate factors that put children at risk to violence and adoption of concrete plans of action to prevent and reduce violence against children at the local, national, regional and global levels; and
- d. Foster Partnerships to End Violence against Children: Foster effective broad-based interreligious partnerships, as well as partnerships between religious organizations and the UN and World Bank Group; aimed at mitigating factors that put children at risk and ending violence against children by implementing the commitments and actions discussed at the consultative event.