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Country note**

Sri Lanka

Summary

The Executive Director presents the country note for Sri Lanka for a programme of cooperation for the period 2002 to 2006.

The situation of children and women

1. Sri Lanka's gains in social development are being eroded by the 17 year armed conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives, displaced over 700,000 people within the country and driven hundreds of thousands to flee abroad. The country's commitment to basic social welfare is under pressure due to the heavy defence expenditure, which has risen from 1.3 per cent of gross domestic product in 1980 to 6 per cent over recent years. Government spending of 12-16 per cent on basic social services, and an average economic growth rate of 4.5 per cent since 1994, have not broken the poverty cycle for about one third of the 20 million population. Every child in Sri Lanka is affected by the conflict, which is eroding the social fabric for generations to come.

2. Despite the conflict, Sri Lanka has managed to sustain its achievements in child survival. Infant and child mortality rates have continued to fall, albeit at slowing rates, to 16 and 20 per 1,000 live births, respectively, and maternal mortality to about 60 per 100,000 live births by 1997. Immunization coverage has

* E/ICEF/2001/2.

** An addendum to the present report containing the final country programme recommendation will be submitted to the Executive Board for approval at its second regular session of 2001.



risen to over 95 per cent, meeting the decade's goals. Gross primary school enrolment has reached nearly 95 per cent for both girls and boys. Gender parity in survival and access to basic social services is a major achievement. Having ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Sri Lanka has demonstrated its commitment to implement these children's and women's rights instruments. Legal reforms to promote child protection include compulsory education for all children up to 14 years old, and the prohibition of employment of children under 14 years old as domestic labour. Legal age at marriage was raised to 18 years for both boys and girls. Sexual harassment and marital rape are recognized as offences. Child-related institutions have been strengthened with the setting up of the National Child Protection Authority, police desks for women and children, and a parliamentary lobby group for children.

3. Yet, many challenges remain. Persistent child mortality, mainly in the first month of life, stems from causes related to the poor health and nutrition of the mother. Child malnutrition, while declining slowly, remains significant, with over one third of children under five years old being under weight. Vitamin A deficiency is a significant public health problem, and iron deficiency affects over one half of children 5 to 10 years old. Acute respiratory infections are common. Malaria is resurgent, and is epidemic in the North Central province and conflict areas. One third of households have no access to sanitation, and about one quarter have no access to safe drinking water. These problems are far worse in the conflict areas, in North Central and Uva provinces, and among the rural poor across the country.

4. About 15 per cent of school-aged children are out of school. There is a trend of declining enrolment and attendance, and increasing drop-out, particularly in the conflict and poorer areas. Poor achievement is a pervasive major problem. Less than 20 per cent of children were reported to reach mastery in numeracy, literacy or life skills in 1994, with little improvement by 1999.

5. An estimated 450,000 children under 15 years old are reported to be working as domestic labour and in other informal sector activities. The children of over 1 million mothers who have migrated abroad for work are particularly vulnerable to neglect and abuse. Ineffective law enforcement and passive social attitudes permit harmful practices to continue. Corporal punishment persists in schools. Over 1 million children are living in a highly militarized environment and are subject to stress and trauma. The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam recruit both boys and girls as combatants.

6. The main problems during adolescence are stress, often related to expectations of high performance in examinations, and the lack of coping abilities. In an environment of violence and pressures within the family and society, adolescence is often a period of risks and disappointments. Most of the 300,000 children who leave school each year do so without the academic and life skills to reach their full potential. Sri Lanka has one of the highest youth suicide rates. Although the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is low, it is a growing risk. Nearly one half of the estimated 7,500 HIV-positive cases are women.

7. Equal education opportunities have not enabled a transformation in unequal gender relations. Women in the legislature and upper ranks of administration are a tiny minority. Domestic violence abounds. Deeply patriarchal structures and

attitudes exclude women from decision-making processes within households and all other institutions.

Lessons learned from past cooperation

8. The challenges posed by the current and emerging situation of children and women in Sri Lanka require a stronger focus on the holistic development of the child, greater integration of the programme for children affected by the conflict with national programmes, and a stronger gender perspective. The mid-term review (MTR) identified the need for a more focused and cross-linked programme structure. It was recommended that a life cycle approach would help to prioritize UNICEF support and achieve greater synergy and convergence of interventions for a more rights-based and holistic development of the child. Strengthening the gender focus requires working more with boys and men, and also demands a better understanding and analysis of the root causes of inequality.

9. The MTR recommended that UNICEF promote innovative approaches and advocate for their wider adoption. The participatory approach to improve nutrition proved particularly effective, creating self-reliance and building new interactive relationships between government structures and communities. School health clubs were more efficient in creating awareness on HIV/AIDS than modifying school curricula. A 24-hour telephone “hot-line” generated more reports of child abuse than efforts to strengthen administrative systems.

10. Social communication must move from information to the promotion of behaviour changes. UNICEF must extend its influence beyond policy makers to civil society, communities and families for the realization of children’s and women’s rights. Greater use must be made of interpersonal and inter-community communication for the promotion of behaviour change. The MTR recommended that the approach of the participatory nutrition improvement programme, which has developed the capacity of communities to assess, analyse, prioritize their needs and take actions, should be expanded with additional components.

11. Many of the donors in the social sectors in Sri Lanka are supporting capital-intensive infrastructure development and sectoral reform. While UNICEF will be engaged in policy dialogue, its comparative strength also lies in developing programmes with the involvement of the communities and responding to their felt needs in a holistic manner, within the overarching framework of children’s and women’s rights. This calls for maintaining a flexible approach and demonstrating innovative programmes which can be taken to scale by partners using a mix of strategies.

Proposed country programme strategy

12. The challenges in Sri Lanka require more focused and coordinated support by international agencies. The United Nations Development Assistance Framework has identified three areas for support: conflict; poverty; and governance. The Government remains committed to providing basic social services, including in conflict-affected areas. Following the rights-based approach, UNICEF support will focus on complementary actions in partnership with the Government and other

donors. The programme aims to mitigate the effects of conflict on children and women within the government framework for relief, rehabilitation and reconciliation, and contribute to poverty reduction through ensuring equity and quality of services for the most disadvantaged, within the government's poverty reduction framework. Support for governance will be promoted through the participation of communities in decision-making and by strengthening subnational levels of Government.

13. The goal of the country programme is to support the progressive realization children's and women's rights through a caring and enabling social and physical environment. The objectives are to ensure: (a) the timely and appropriate support of women and children affected by the armed conflict; (b) optimum growth and development in early childhood; (c) increased rates of school attendance and learning achievement in middle childhood; (d) improved skills, coping capacities and the participation of adolescents; and (e) appropriate targeted support to children and women in need of special protection.

14. The overall strategy of the country programme will be to build capacity and empower duty-bearers at all levels of society to enable them to protect, promote and be accountable for the rights of Sri Lanka's children and women. It will: (a) promote the participation of families to assess and analyse their situation and to take actions to realize children's and women's rights; (b) strengthen the skills of local-level service-providers and facilitators; (c) strengthen the capacity of institutions at subnational levels to meet the needs of children within a rights-based approach; and (d) advocate at the national level for child-friendly policies and legislation, and mobilize resources to meet children's and women's rights.

15. Gender issues will be addressed across all programme areas through a strategy of working with partners to promote the equal participation of women in decision-making, and working with both men and boys on gender-based violence. Greater understanding of the issues and actions needed will be supported by promoting the collection of gender-disaggregated data for better monitoring and reporting on gender disparities, and addressing the root causes.

16. The programme on **children affected by armed conflict** will include all components of the country programme, in accordance with the Martigny principles, and address conflict-specific problems. Several United Nations partners and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with the support of many donors, provide assistance for relief and rehabilitation. While some assistance will continue to meet these needs, the major objective will be to mitigate the psychosocial effects of the war on children. This will be achieved by helping families, communities and schools to create as much of an environment of normalcy as possible for children; creating opportunities for care, play, sport, social development and cultural activities; and helping parents and caregivers to recognize and respond to the stress of children. Support through NGOs will continue for community-based credit for income-generating activities for war widows, community-based rehabilitation, mine awareness campaigns and family reunification for unaccompanied children. The protection of children from recruitment and from the militarization of their environment will be addressed through advocacy and action, including promotion of the concept of "children as zones of peace". Capacity will be built to monitor and report on rights violations and to develop adequate responses for which UNICEF

field staffing has been strengthened. Based on past experience, the programme will be funded through appeals.

17. In the **early child care, growth and development** programme, greater emphasis will be placed on reducing the high levels of malnutrition, and on the emotional, psychosocial and cognitive development of the child. This will be implemented through expansion of the community-based nutrition improvement approach, strengthening of home-based caring practices and making pre-schools more child-friendly. A safe environment within communities and households will be promoted by enhancing personal hygiene and access to safe water and sanitation.

18. Complementing the significant support of other donors in health and nutrition, the programme will help to sustain survival gains by enhancing the quality of services for safe motherhood and providing limited support to immunization and the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness initiative.

19. Recognizing quality as a major issue in education, the Government has embarked on major education reforms, with large-scale support from the Government of the United Kingdom, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. Complementing those efforts, the **learning during middle childhood and development during adolescence** programme will focus on getting excluded children back to school, giving a "second chance" through non-formal channels, and monitoring achievement levels. This will be implemented through social mobilization to identify out-of-school children and facilitate their return; the development of teacher capacity to deal with "catch-up" pupils; and the development of models of child-friendly schools as well as for the participation and accountability of teachers, parents, pupils and community. The programme will also build capacity to assess and analyse achievement levels and their determinants, and advocate for corrective actions.

20. The programme will promote healthy lifestyles and life skills for adolescents so they reach their full potential as adults. This will include the prevention of substance abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour, and ensuring access to youth-friendly health services. The participation of schools, health systems, NGOs and the media will be promoted, with an emphasis on the disadvantaged groups in urban slums and estates. Social mobilization to prevent HIV/AIDS/sexually transmitted diseases will be supported within the government framework for adolescent health.

21. The programme for the **protection of children and women** will work with men and women, as well as girls and boys, to create awareness of violence, abuse and neglect, and to strengthen their capacity to deal with these issues. National and subnational institutions will be strengthened, including law enforcement authorities and the judiciary, to enforce legislation against child abuse and gender discrimination. Research will be supported to develop indicators and tools to measure the extent of gender-based violence and gender inequality.

22. The programme on **rights-based planning, communication, policy analysis, and monitoring and evaluation** will strengthen the capacities of counterparts and civil society to monitor implementation of the two Conventions and to plan and allocate resources for women and children at the subnational level. In-house capacity will be strengthened to advocate on policy issues and implement effective social communication approaches. Studies will be carried out to support policy change and advocate for increased investment in children. The integrated

monitoring and evaluation plan will track progress and results achieved against the programme objectives.

23. **Cross-sectoral costs** will cover posts, travel and support staff in supply, procurement, logistics and security.

Estimated programme budget

Estimated programme cooperation, 2002-2006^a

(In thousands of United States dollars)

	<i>Regular resources</i>	<i>Other resources</i>	<i>Total</i>
Children affected by armed conflict	–	2 000 ^b	2 000
Early child care, growth and development	1 405	3 600	5 005
Learning during middle childhood and development during adolescence	664	1 800	2 464
Protection of children and women	625	1 800	2 425
Rights-based planning, communication, policy analysis, and monitoring and evaluation	703	550	1 253
Cross-sectoral costs	508	250	758
Total	3 905	10 000	13 905

^a These are indicative figures only which are subject to change once aggregate financial data are finalized.

^b In addition, this programme will be funded through appeals estimated to raise \$13 million based on the experience in the current programme of cooperation.