

# UNICEF's Equity-Focused Approach

## Comments on concept note

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Over the years, I have interacted closely with numerous UNICEF officials and visited UNICEF projects in southern Africa. And I must admit that in many instances, I found UNICEF's efforts to be conceptually the most sophisticated and practically, the best programmed. I have also noted the growing interest among UNICEF staff to revisit a set of core concepts and problems – including inequality, vulnerability and social exclusion – that often produce, maintain and reinforce poverty and make human development elusive. It is in this context that this foray into an equity-focused approach to child survival, education and development must be viewed as particularly timely and relevant.

### **1. *What is the equity-focused approach really all about?***

In the three documents that were sent to me, the equity-focused approach is never really explained. What I did notice was the brief distinction between the equity-focused and so-called “current path” approaches, although these appear to be very generally framed. So, for example, while the current path approach emphasises the training of professional health workers and infrastructure projects, it is claimed that the equity-focused approach focuses on “the poorest and most marginalized areas first”. The documents actually do a very good job of answering the “why”, but very little on the “how” questions.

The added value of the equity-focused approach is accordingly its ability to provide “enhanced efforts to focus on those *worst off* – through community outreach, eliminating user charges, and other ways”. And based on the experiments conducted by UNICEF thus far, the conclusion is that the equity-focused approach is most effective – and most cost effective – in low-income, high mortality countries. Accordingly, the future priorities of UNICEF, and indeed that of many other actors in the UN system, include

- 1) Identifying and investing more in the most deprived
- 2) Investing in proven, cost-effective interventions
- 3) Overcoming various types of bottlenecks
- 4) Partnering with communities, with a focus on excluded groups
- 5) Making the most of available resources

While I greatly sympathise with such views, I wish to specifically raise two relatively broad sets of challenges.

## **2. *Equity or equality***

‘Equity’ is often defined as the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair (i.e. the notion of global justice).

‘Equality’, on the other hand, is mainly understood as the quality of being the same in quantity or measure or value or status.

Here, the distinction can be made between an ideal result (i.e. following from an equity-based approach) and a concrete result (that follows from a focus on equality).

**Q: I am interested in understanding the rationale behind UNICEF’s choice of terms. Where is the inequality dimension? And *how* do we tackle the uncomfortable questions of power, discrimination and lack of rights and lack of access?**

Indeed, many development actors, including international and domestic agencies, continue to feel uncomfortable about speaking of ‘inequality reduction’ as it involves confronting the power of national, regional and local elites. In my own interactions with the staff of multilateral institutions, the continued presence, growth and/or production of “inequality” frequently crops up as a main explanatory variable for unsatisfactory results of their development efforts. And yet, the reluctance to address inequality directly in country operations appears well entrenched in most institutions.

Hence, while many may accept that inequality is a problem, there is seldom a concerted effort to address it. This is where I believe UNICEF provided insightful analyses in the 1990s through its focus on the human rights-based approach to programming.

What ever happened to HRBAP? Many of the issues we have highlighted thus far today were rather well addressed by UNICEF in its work on the HRBA.

Has the HRBA now been discarded in favour of the equity-focused approach? If so, why?

*Legal and political equality versus social equality*

A welfare state may provide tangible and material benefits to its population without successfully including marginalised groups in social and political decision-making. Hence, legal equality is not necessarily the same as social equality.

In its World Development Report 2006, the World Bank also preferred to use 'equity' rather than 'equality'. Accordingly, 'equity' was defined in relation to two basic principles: *equal opportunities* and *avoidance of deprivation in outcomes* (e.g. in relation to health, education and consumption levels). The general prescription provided in UNICEF's documents on the equity-focused approach generally appears to mirror the recommendations of WDR 2006: that the greater the equity, the more efficient will a country be able to utilize its resources.

**Q: So, what is UNICEF proposing that has not already been proposed in WDR 2006 and in subsequent documents emanating from the Bank?**

### **3.     *Social inclusion***

UNICEF highlights some important constraints related to societal norms and standards that discriminate, and the need to promote advocacy and awareness, and generally aiming towards empowering communities.

I believe that an equity-focused approach ought to consider not only the causes, patterns and dynamics of social exclusion (where there already exists considerable literature), but also the intrinsic and instrumental value of *social inclusion*. This will have relevance not only in relation to the social constraints identified in the documents, but also the constraints related to the policy environment, availability of commodities, human resources and functioning infrastructure, and the difficulties people face in accessing services

UNICEF's work on this topic could for example aim towards advocating a nuanced understanding of the "identity" of individuals and groups that are the targets of social inclusion policies. For example, I may wish to be included as a beneficiary without the state considering me worthy of such targeting. Conversely, the state may wish to include me, but I do not feel I qualify or wish to be included.

Consider the following: Some minority groups may prefer not to aggressively claim discrimination or be unwilling to criticise the lack (or failure) of social inclusion policies in the hope that they will be socially included in the future. Such tactics may be adopted in order not to displease majority groups or bring unwanted attention on the plight of the minority group concerned. Thus, there is a danger that a low profile strategy may be mistakenly understood as an indicator of successful social inclusion.

The perception of own "identity" and those of others is crucial. The perceived social standing of minority groups by society may disqualify such groups from being considered for special attention aimed at inclusion. But human beings do not wish to

bring shame and humiliation upon themselves by being projected as weak, backward, dependent or objects of charity. This in turn is a factor that prevents many individuals from wanting to be affiliated with, or classified as, an excluded group and hence the targets of a policy of social inclusion.

**Q: Thus an important question to ask is: *Who is pushing for inclusion, and why? Who qualifies to be included, and why?***

One way of viewing the problem is to argue that it has become a matter of routine these days to speak of 'poverty reduction' rather than highlighting the need for "inequality reduction". The point here is that we need to also focus on understanding the strategies pursued by those who often *benefit* from the development process. For example, I believe UNICEF has the potential to boldly emphasise the sets of actions adopted by powerful actors in society to *produce* exclusion (e.g. through active discriminative practices) and their *active or passive hindrance* in preventing or stifling the success of measures aimed at inclusion (e.g. making unrealistic demands of social acceptance bordering on the notion of "assimilation").

#### *Double discrimination*

Attempts to promote social inclusion should take into account the fact that many individuals may face greater barriers to integration than simply being a part of a defined minority group. Thus, a combination of axes of exclusion can reinforce each other (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, religion). Accordingly, measures to promote inclusion may prove counterproductive if they do not take into account the heterogeneity of needs and social standing within a particular group.

## **CONCLUSION**

Inequality is multidimensional and changing its many forms in tandem is a difficult task. I therefore believe that a focus on inequity and/or inequality can have the greatest influence if used in relation to a concrete developmental problem such as health, nutrition and education – goals that societal and political actors may understand, agree and value. This is where UNICEF with its focus on children's health and education has, in many ways, a great advantage over many other organisations.

Often, however, the difficulty is that the problem is not seen as a *problem* by influential actors in society. Thus, gaining social and political acceptance of an approach that focuses on uncomfortable questions of power, discrimination and the production of poverty is a difficult exercise. But such concerns should not prevent us from being bold enough to choose a path that squarely places inequity and/or inequality as the main explanatory variables for the elusive nature of development today.