

Children at risk

Background

At the inaugural UN World Summit for Children in 1990, heads of state and government officials committed to achieve 27 goals to improve the wellbeing of children by the year 2000. A decade later, it was decided to review the progress made by each country at a Special Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGASS) in 2002. The UNGASS would provide the primary focus for global consensus on pro-child policy and resourcing decisions for the next decade, so on the 16th April 2001, child rights activists launched the global campaign 'Say Yes to Children'. They aimed to bring child rights to public attention, and ask leaders to pledge strong action at UNGASS.

Tearfund started a Children At Risk (CAR) programme in 2000. Advocacy was a key component, as was supporting the work of partners and civil society groups through Regional CAR facilitators. The UNGASS became a focal point for Tearfund's CAR team. Their main objective for the Session was to link the local work and experiences of partners, and the voices of children affected by violence, with the decision makers at UNGASS.

International Action

A series of Preparatory Committees (Prepcoms) were to be held before UNGASS, where parliamentarians, NGOs, academics and others would gather evidence of progress thus far, and broker agreement between governments on the required next steps for action. Tearfund staff and partners contributed to all the Prepcoms, providing a Christian perspective, evidence of progress and suggested alterations to the text of the outcome documents.

During the second Prepcom, Tearfund's CAR facilitator for Colombia heard about the 'Say Yes to Children' campaign, and returned to Colombia to raise awareness of it and UNGASS. In order to do this, she facilitated the growth of the Colombian Children's Network, which included Tearfund partners. They asked children and adults to vote on which of the campaign's 10 points around child rights most urgently needed to be taken into account for children's development in Colombia.

4,845,791 votes were collected – the highest number in Latin America. The two highest priorities selected were the right to education, followed by the protection of children from war. Based on these results, the Network wrote an open letter to country delegates at the third UNGASS Prepcom, outlining some of the issues they felt should be included in the outcomes document.

The UNGASS would be the first UN Session where children were actively encouraged to attend and play an active role. The Tearfund team aimed to connect those at grass roots level with decision makers and consequently asked a representative from the Colombian Children's Network to join their delegation. Her name was Jesica Meneses and at just 14 years old she had already experienced displacement and violence. As a result of this, she had become a leader in her own right and been extensively involved in peacemaking activities like the Say Yes campaign.



Jesica (r) during the Say Yes campaign

The Special Session was held on 8-10th May in 2002. Over 300 children took part, alongside leaders of countries, NGOs, church and business leaders. Tearfund and partner staff, and Jesica, lobbied the UK, Colombian and other governments, as well as playing a key role in NGO discussions. They attended meetings with key individuals such as UK Chancellor Gordon Brown. Jesica and the Colombian CAR facilitator helped to present the top ten key issues of Colombian civil society, as determined by the Say Yes campaign.

The final outcomes of the Summit reflected the 'asks' of Colombian civil society. Heads of state adopted the UNGASS Declaration and Plan of Action 'A World Fit For Children' (WFFC), agreeing to implement a series of goals and actions. These focussed on four key areas, two of which were the top priorities of the Colombian campaign: promoting healthy lives; providing quality education for all; protecting children against abuse, exploitation and violence; and combating HIV and AIDS. These four areas dovetailed with the recently agreed MDGs, but a number of specific targets were set to ensure that children would benefit from the achievement of the goals.

Impact at National level

By 2006, 177 countries were engaged in WFFC follow up activities, with phenomenal progress in some areas. One WFFC target was to halve the number of deaths due to measles by 2005. This target was smashed as global rates were reduced by 60%, and by 75% in sub-Saharan Africa alone. Another health target was the elimination of iodine deficiency disorders (IDD) by 2005. In 1990, IDD affected 2 billion people – just under half of the world's population – with goitres, stillbirth and congenital abnormalities. Yet IDD are incredibly easy to eliminate, by simply adding iodine to salt. The 2002 commitment marked a step change in elimination progress, with the number of countries implementing salt iodisation programmes increasing by a third in the years afterwards. In 1993, 110 countries had a severe IDD public health problem. By 2005, only 14 countries were classified as such.

The problem of low numbers of birth registration was addressed by one WFFC target. If children are not registered, it makes it difficult or impossible for them to be recognised as a citizen of their own country, causing numerous disadvantages and discrimination. In 2002, UNICEF estimated that 40% of births were not registered, but by 2008 this had dropped to just over 30%. After the UNGASS, many countries made a concerted effort to increase registration rates. For example, Lesotho targeted marginalised children and registered 73,000 orphans and child-headed households by 2005. In Cambodia, child registration levels rose from 22% in 2000, to 66% in 2005/2006.

National Case study: Colombia

Taking part in UNGASS had a significant impact on Tearfund partners. They felt empowered, and more confident to approach decision makers. They discovered that taking part in UNGASS had enhanced their credibility and professional voice at the national level which enabled them to hold their government to account.

The Colombian government committed to writing a child action plan within one year of the Session. There was a change of President directly after UNGASS which slightly delayed this, but at the end of the year a draft Action Plan was in place. Tearfund and its partners then played an active role in developing the government's ten year plan of action for children. However, they believed the plan needed to be complemented by a sound legislative base of child's rights. They therefore helped build the capacity of an Alliance of more than 100 organisations to work for the reform of Colombia's 1989 Code of Minors. The Code was regarded as being out of date, inadequate and incomplete. Partners lobbied for a comprehensive law which covered all aspects of childhood. Their efforts paid off on the 15th March 2007 when Act No. 1098, the Children and Adolescents Code, was passed in Colombia. This law gives comprehensive protection to under 18s and complements the action plan.

Colombians still face a number of challenges, from unexploded landmines to natural disasters. However, there is evidence that the situation is improving for children. In 2002, nearly three million children did not receive a formal education. This was selected as the most important thing to change during the voting of the Say Yes to Children Campaign. By 2007, only 524,000 children were still out of school. In 2002, approximately 1.1 million children were displaced by violence; the second area of concern for the campaign. By 2007 this figure was approximately 185,000 children.

Community Impact

After the passing of the Children's Code, Tearfund partners ran workshops to help raise awareness in the communities and churches where they worked. 14 year old Jesica, who was part of Tearfund's delegation to UNGASS, spoke at the annual meeting of the Confederation of evangelical churches. At this prestigious event she explained the commitments made by governments at UNGASS, and discussed the role of the church in this area.

Jesica was just one of hundreds of thousands of children displaced by conflict in Colombia. At the age of 11, she began teaching other internally displaced children. She became a champion for peace and joined the Colombian Children's Network, where she campaigned on child rights and eventually attended the UN Special Session on children at the age of 14. Her lobbying trip sparked great interest in her community, who finally felt that people were listening to their struggles and trying to help. Having played her role in changing the laws of her country, Jesica continued to champion child rights. This formerly displaced child is now a remarkable woman of 24, and about to graduate from her studies in systems engineering.