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Protecting the Vulnerable
Children of Vietnam
A Report prepared for
UNICEF's Next Generation
December 2013

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Through your generosity, UNICEF is working with the government of Vietnam to create a more child-friendly justice system, improving access to justice for child victims and witnesses of crimes, and providing due process and proper alternatives for children involved in criminal activities. Through the continued support and the generosity of Next Generation, UNICEF is working towards a world where zero children are victims of violence or abuse.

Overview

Millions of children in Vietnam face many challenges preventing them from realizing their full potential in life. The Vietnam Ministry of Labor estimates over 4.2 million children under the age of 16 — nearly 18 percent of all Vietnamese children — are either orphans, abandoned, disabled, victims of toxic substances, infected with HIV/AIDS, sexually abused, exploited and/or in conflict with the law. These children are also victims of human trafficking and kidnapping.

One major cause for these increased dangers is internal migration. Internal migration occurs when families migrate to urban areas to find work. The risks to children occur when parents who migrate are unable to find work and turn to criminal activities such as prostitution for their livelihood. Unfortunately, this exposure causes children to become both participants and victims to the crimes they witness such as prostitution and physical and sexual abuse.

The number of juveniles in conflict with the law is rising. Between 2004 and 2007, 27,770 juveniles were charged with crimes and prosecuted, an increase of 63 percent over a three year period. The most common offences committed by juveniles are theft and robbery, disturbing public order, and drug-related crimes. Vietnam's juvenile justice and penal systems are largely punitive and lack child-friendly, rehabilitative practices. Of 13,934 juveniles convicted between 2007 and 2009, 11,475 were sentenced to imprisonment (82 percent).

Problems in the justice and penal systems are intensified by the absence of a strong and effective child protection system.

Currently, there is a lack of professional social work and protection services to support all vulnerable children, and where specialized services do exist, they are often fragmented or unregulated, unable to effectively and consistently protect and ensure the safety of these children. Child friendly justice systems are essential for ensuring that children experiencing abuse, exploitation or neglect are not re-victimized by a criminal justice system that is not equipped to deal with children and the unique situations they present.

UNICEF in Action

UNICEF is working with the government of Vietnam to establish a child-friendly justice system for vulnerable children by improving access to justice for child victims and witnesses of crimes and providing due process and proper alternatives to children involved in criminal activities. UNICEF is providing technical support to enhance the capacity of law enforcement, legal, judicial, and social welfare institutions for improved justice for children through the development and implementation of child-friendly investigation, prosecution, and adjudication procedures. UNICEF is working with the government to establish child-friendly police investigation rooms and specialized child protection police units, as well as specialized courts for families, children, and juveniles. The program will also support the development and implementation of pilot diversion programs, restorative justice programs, and reintegration schemes for juvenile offenders. The program also supports juvenile crime prevention activities and the development of protection services for child victims and witnesses of crimes.

During the current reporting period UNICEF supported the following activities:

- **Establishing child-friendly justice structures in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and Dong Thap province:** In order to raise awareness and advocate for a more child-friendly justice system, two consultation workshops were held in HCMC and Dong Thap province. The workshops focused on community-based support and rehabilitation for juveniles in trouble with the police, and involved key leaders and senior staff members of the provincial Police, Procuracy, Courts and the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA). The workshops facilitated discussions and education around the development of the Provincial Plans for Dong Thap and HCMC, and program implementation of community-based support for juveniles in conflict with the law. These Provincial Plans clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the different government departments and agencies, and establish a coordination mechanism on juvenile justice. In order to bolster these child-friendly justice structures, UNICEF supported stronger coordination between the various agencies that deal with children in the legal and justice systems through case conference meetings at the commune (an administrative sub-division of the district) and district levels. The meetings create a space for discussion on the development and implementation of the individual intervention plans, and monitor the progress of the children in the criminal justice system.

- Increasing the knowledge and skills of local child protection and justice officers on justice for children in HCMC and Dong Thap province:** UNICEF supported the recruitment and training of 63 commune justice workers, known as Justice Collaborates, in the two target provinces. The Justice Collaborators were coached and trained on child and adolescent development, factors contributing to youths committing crimes, and equipped with knowledge and skills on basic case management and counseling. Following training, the Justice Collaborators have begun conducting regular outreach work within the selected communes, visiting children in conflict with the law and their families, conducting assessments of the child, and developing an individualized intervention plan for each child. The intervention plan refers the child and family to the appropriate support services (e.g. counseling, vocational training, life-skills training, and legal aid) so that underlying risk factors contributing to offending behavior can be addressed and the child can develop coping strategies to better deal with difficulties in their lives. Inter-disciplinary training on juvenile justice practices was also conducted for 70 law enforcement, judicial and welfare sector staff members in Dong Thap province. The training allowed the law enforcement, judicial and welfare sector personnel to develop an understanding of best practices for preventing and responding to juvenile offenders. Trainings encouraged staff to focus on promoting diversion, restorative justice and alternatives to detention. Additionally, 34 officers and frontline investigators in HCMC were trained on child-friendly interview techniques.
- Improving community-based interventions and services for at risk children and juveniles in conflict with the law:** At the community level, 45 juveniles in conflict with the law have benefited from life-skills training, which provide basic life and personal competence skills, including anger management and skills related to resisting negative peer-pressure on alcohol and illegal-substance use.



Ho Chi Minh City – Police participating in a training on child friendly investigation and interrogation techniques.

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This training was supplemented with training courses on positive parenting skills for the parents and care-givers of these children. The supplemental training was aimed at promoting the development of non-violent, protective, and nurturing family environments for children.

The Way Forward

Next Generation's investment is helping UNICEF and the government of Vietnam address the child protection needs of vulnerable families and children. Your support is helping to strengthen the capacity of social welfare personnel, provide accurate information and data on child protection, and support legal and structural reform to make the justice systems more child-friendly. In the coming months UNICEF will continue to support justice system reforms and the establishment of child-friendly practices throughout all arms of the criminal justice system. Below are some of the planned activities for 2014 made possible by Next Generation's partnership:

- Support the provision of psycho-social support for juveniles currently in reform schools as a result of conflict with the law, ultimately promoting their early release and preparing them for reintegration back into the community.
- Develop specialized services for juveniles in conflict with the law and youth-at-risk, including prevention services, diversion and restorative justice programs.
- Continue to build the capacity of the police, justice and welfare officers, prosecutors, judges and Justice Collaborators to develop and deliver child-friendly services.
- Develop an inter-agency protocol to strengthen coordination around diverting juveniles in conflict with the law away from the formal justice system, promoting alternatives to detention, and reintegration back into the community.



Ho Chi Minh City – Police participating in a training on child friendly investigation and interrogation techniques.

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- Develop communication and advocacy activities to raise awareness and address the stigmatization of juveniles in conflict with the law, and promote family and community support for the development of community-based rehabilitation options.

Expression of Thanks

Thank you for your investment in the children of Vietnam. This support has allowed UNICEF to work in partnership with the government of Vietnam towards building a robust and effective child protection system. With your support, UNICEF and the government of Vietnam are helping to protect children and adolescents from a punitive justice system and reform practices to better reflect child protection principles. UNICEF is working towards a sustainable solution to ensure no child is the victim of abuse, exploitation, or neglect.

UNICEF is committed to providing children and communities with the tools they need to lead healthy and productive lives, free from the threat of harm. With your help, UNICEF is working to making this a reality in the lives of the children of Vietnam.

On behalf of the children of Vietnam, thank you for your support.



Next Generation and children after a swimming lesson for 6-11 year olds in a local river along the Mekong Delta Thanh commune in Thanh Binh district. Swimming lessons are part of child injury prevention activities.

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Casey D. Rotter Deputy Director & Founder UNICEF’s Next Generation
 U.S. Fund for UNICEF
 125 Maiden Lane
 New York, NY 10038
 212.880.9164

crotter@unicefusa.org

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