

CRC Day of Discussion

September 2007



Child Helplines: The Role of Governments in Securing the
Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Children in Need of
Care and Protection

Introduction

Child helplines around the world provide an invaluable service to children in need of care and protection. While a child's reason for calling may vary between continents, regions, countries and cities, one factor remains the same: the child contacting the child helpline is taking an important first step towards exercising a number of basic rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC). Moreover, while states parties to the UN CRC have an obligation to direct resources ensuring the human rights of all children, they have a special obligation of making visible the easily cast aside: the marginalised child.

Child Helpline International is a membership-based, network organisation that brings diverse child helplines from throughout the world together to share, discuss and form strategies on how to best serve the needs of children on a global level. With 93 member helplines sprinkled throughout the world, Child Helpline International was founded on the belief that children and young people have rights, and that they are the best individuals to identify their problems *if* they are equipped with the proper information and tools.

Child Helpline International does more than gather existing child helplines. Indeed, it also facilitates the start-up of child helplines in countries interested in starting a child helpline and/or in countries which do not have a strong child protection system. Child Helpline International takes an active role in advocating on a global level for children and their rights as set down in the UN CRC, be it with governments, children's networks, UN Bodies or the private sector. Moreover, Child Helpline International is fully committed to recommending child helplines as a tool towards child protection to all states parties to the UN CRC at each Committee Session. As an organisation devoted to securing children's rights, every project and initiative undertaken by Child Helpline International and its members reflects their trenchant belief in the Convention.

How Child Helplines Help Secure Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

A child helpline is a telecommunication service for or on behalf of children in need of care and protection. In 2005, child helplines around the world answered approximately 10.5 million calls. The reasons why children call vary, ranging from needing someone to talk to about their relationships, the day's events or for emergency situations, such as getting help for suicidal tendencies, escaping from a sexual trafficking ring or contacting

parents after having been missing. From the perspective of the child, all matters are important. From a child *rights* perspective and as outlined in the UN CRC, the economic, social and cultural rights needs of the child often come into play and must be protected.

Child helplines provide a critical link towards ensuring the economic, social and cultural rights of a child. These rights are not isles unto themselves, and are in tandem with civil and political rights. A child contacting a child helpline is expressing his basic human right of freedom of expression, but it means nothing if he or she does not have the resources to pay or access a telephone. The right to an education or to health care means nothing if a child contacting a child helpline suffers discrimination on account of his race or cannot afford treatment for a disability.

Children who are economically disadvantaged, socially unaccepted and culturally discriminated against, often all at once, are children at risk. Marginalised children who suffer the perils of poverty are at the mercy of others, and are easy prey for unscrupulous traffickers or exploitative employers. Marginalised children who belong to religious or ethnic minorities can easily be cast aside and ignored. For such children, knowing that their situation is not the status quo, that help can be had, that life can be different is the key to a better future. By contacting a child helpline, a brave child is taking an important first step to making a change in their life. By being contacted by a child, child helplines capture the voice of the marginalised child and can use it to influence policy decisions.

Recommendation 1: Governments should fund child helplines and not duplicate efforts

Child helplines listen to the voices of children and link them to the appropriate services and resources in the country. The type of services offered to children by child helplines reflects the diversity of child helplines themselves and, often, the infrastructure of the country. Services run the gamut from counseling the caller through emphatic listening to directly intervening and removing the child from an emergency situation. In some cases the need of the child maybe outside the scope of the helpline, in which case the child helpline may refer the child to the appropriate governmental child protection entity within the country. In such cases, the child helpline recognises its responsibility to follow-up

with the appropriate authorities to ensure that the needs of the child are being met. Despite the shared characteristics of child helplines throughout the world, there is no “cookie-cutter” mold that can be applied across the board. Instead, child helplines must adapt their services to the level of commitment expressed by the government through the provision of resources AND to the needs as expressed by children in the community. In all cases, it is most important for the child to know that they are not alone, that someone outside of their immediate surroundings cares about them, that their life can be free from pain and fear.

In recognising the value of child helplines, governments should not duplicate existing efforts. Many states parties to the Convention, in observation of the Convention itself and through the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, start a child helpline. While this is a laudable effort in countries where no child helpline exists, it is a wasteful one in countries where there is already a fully operational child helpline. Government monies that go into the training, recruitment and development of a new child helpline would be better spent in working closely with already existing child helplines, which often have not only the expertise in the child protection sector, but also the brand recognition amongst the community.

Recommendation 2: State parties should reconsider how they disburse their funds

States parties to the Convention have the political and moral responsibility to allocate the funds necessary for the protection of children. To be sure, many governments have devoted resources to specific child-related issues, such as street children; child labour; HIV/AIDS; children with disabilities to name a few. Children, however, cannot be isolated or categorised into one issue. Indeed, they must be seen holistically from an emotional, medical and educational point of view.

Governments often direct resources into specific child-related issues which tend to isolate children without taking into account the environment in which they live. That is, governments do not often see the relationship of children with regard to the larger society in which they live: a society where children co-exist with adults, parents, teachers and, for better or worse, a social welfare system. Thus, to determine the best use of resources, governments need to know where the gaps in services are to be able to best

direct them and strengthen the child protection system as a whole. Child helplines are integral to the child protection system and can provide a critical link in identifying those gaps. With this information in hand, a government can direct resources to the various Departments or Ministries where child protection services can best be enhanced and provide quality care and services to children.

Most countries have a government budget for children which is often incorporated within the Ministry of Children or the Ministry of Women and Children. From this budget line, finances are allocated to specific projects for the protection of children. Projects may include financing a public school for the education of children, caring for children affected by HIV/AIDS or funding a project to rescue commercially exploited children. Despite government efforts to help children in need of care and protection, there are two potential problems with this set-up. Firstly, by funding individual projects to address specific issues like HIV/AIDS, education or sexual abuse, valuable resources can be wasted because many of these issues overlap. For example, a child affected by HIV/AIDS may be in need of financial resources and may resort to commercial exploitation to make ends meet. Thus, a more effective allocation of resources would be to fund projects that cater to a range of intertwined issues, such as funding a project for children affected by HIV/AIDS **and** malaria rather than just one of those issues. A more comprehensive approach to child protection issues would limit the waste of resources and ensure the governments are allocating the maximum extent of resources to the needs of children in need of care and protection.

Moreover, government resources should be distributed in a non-discriminatory and equitable manner. Data received from child helplines globally show that funding received from national governments is much less than funds received from other sources. Indeed, in 2005, only 51% of member helplines received some form of funding from the government. By funding specific projects, governments are only able to reach a small target group. In doing so, they are unable to link the 'maximum extent' and their obligation to fulfil the implementation of economic, social and cultural rights of children.

Conclusion

State parties need to consider mechanisms such as child helplines as key tools towards child protection. Children and young people should be able to access child helplines 24-hours a day and free of cost for both the child and the child helpline. Child helplines

reach out to all children in need of care and protection, particularly the marginalised child. By listening to the voices of children and using it to influence policy decisions, child helplines play a crucial role in monitoring the impact of resources on the lives of children. By giving children the opportunity to express their concerns and talk about the issues directly affecting them, child helplines provide children with a basic human right – the dignity that comes with being heard.