

Putting children at the centre

**a child-focused response
to the sexual abuse
and exploitation
of children**



a policy briefing

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Putting children at the centre: A child-focused response to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children

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This work draws on previous World Vision research and publications, and discussions with numerous people throughout the World Vision partnership, including the four regional leads in the WCIII working group, Abid Gulzar and Laurence Gray.

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Finger puppets, dolls and stuffed animals are used in therapy sessions at the Neavear Thmey Trauma Recovery Centre, Phnom Penh, a transitional residential home for girls who have been sexually exploited. Many of the girls will be reintegrated with their families, or transitioned to foster care homes.*

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“There is a girl named ‘Orn’,¹ aged about 14 or 15, who was sold by her step-mother to a Thai tourist at a casino in Poi Pet for 20,000 baht. The step-mother said that it is better than just having sex with a boyfriend without earning any money.”

– a young person in Thailand²

World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities world-wide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. As followers of Jesus, World Vision is dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. World Vision serves all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

Children are often most vulnerable to the effects of poverty. World Vision works with each partner community to ensure that children are able to enjoy improved nutrition, health and education. Where children live in especially difficult circumstances, surviving on the streets, suffering in exploitative labour, or exposed to the abuse and trauma of conflict, World Vision works to restore hope and to bring justice.

World Vision recognises that poverty is not inevitable. Our Mission Statement calls us to challenge those unjust structures that constrain the poor in a world of false priorities, gross inequalities and distorted values. World Vision desires that all people be able to reach their God-given potential, and thus works for a world that no longer tolerates poverty.

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introduction

“150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence during 2002.”

– World Health Organization estimate³

Despite growing international recognition and response since the first World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in 1996,

sexual abuse and exploitation remain painfully real for millions of children around the world.⁴

Indeed, evidence suggests that the situation is worsening and that changing technologies and patterns of social interaction continue to open up new channels for abuse.⁵

In this context, the 2008 World Congress III Against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents provides a critical and timely opportunity to renew and refocus efforts to protect children in the 21st Century.

World Vision has extensive programme and policy experience in responding to this issue in all regions of the world, protecting children from abuse and helping



Children from families displaced by the 2004 Asian tsunami play in Banda Aceh, Sumatra, Indonesia. Child-friendly Spaces are established to protect children who become more vulnerable due to natural disaster.
photo: Jon Warren/World Vision

those who have been sexually exploited (see Box 1).⁶ This paper draws on our experience, and on insights gained through research and recent focus group discussions held with children and youth from around the globe.⁷

The following pages highlight the key challenges in implementing a child-focused response to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. We identify five recommendations for meeting these challenges:

- 1. At all levels, we must view children and youth as equal participants in efforts to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of children.**
- 2. We must ensure that all children are valued equally and afforded equal rights to protection, redress and care.**
- 3. Governments must ensure that robust, child-centred legal provisions exist to combat the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and are enforced nationally and internationally with the highest regard for the rights and well-being of the child.**
- 4. We must ensure that long-term structural vulnerabilities and root causes of sexual exploitation are addressed in addition to strongly enforced child-centred legislation.**
- 5. We must view the protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation as everyone's responsibility; efforts must**

be intensified to develop protective environments for children at every level.

The appendix suggests actions and strategies that governments, the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society, communities and children themselves can

employ to achieve these recommendations.

We note that, throughout this paper, the term “children” refers to those under the age of 18, in line with the United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and therefore includes those who may be considered

Box 1: Examples of World Vision’s work to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of children

In **Asia and the Pacific**, World Vision is implementing various national and regional projects within the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) countries to reduce vulnerabilities to human trafficking and to help survivors to recover. Our Regional Advocacy anti-Child Trafficking Project (RACTP), for example, works in six GMS countries to help establish a positive environment in which anti-trafficking policies can be applied effectively, especially in relation to child trafficking. We are building collaboration between project teams working in the source, transit and destination countries of trafficked children.

In addition, World Vision works to promote child protection in the 24 Asian and Pacific countries in which we operate. For example, we collaborate with others to use the UN *Violence Against Children Study* as a vehicle to highlight the need for an increased focus on child rights issues in the region.

Across **Latin America and the Caribbean**, World Vision is currently working to address sexual exploitation in 14 countries. In Peru, for example, child advocacy and protection offices have been established in a number of communities to receive and process cases of child abuse and mistreatment. In Colombia, we have worked with over 7,000 families as part of the Good Treatment campaign, which focused on ending the mistreatment of children.

In Costa Rica, World Vision has over 5 years of experience working with community-based organisations (CBOs), empowering them to prevent and report abuse, and with children, developing their capacity to protect themselves and other children in their community. We have run national campaigns to raise social awareness of the abuse and exploitation of children in vulnerable areas and provided training for teachers and governmental entities, such as police and migration officers, on tackling the issue.

In the **Middle East and Eastern Europe**, World Vision is addressing this issue through various avenues, with a particular focus on human trafficking. We implement practical programming at the grassroots levels, pursue institutional reform at the governmental level, and co-ordinate our efforts with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). We are also involved in the Keeping Children Safe Online project, which shows children how to guard themselves from potential sexual exploitation on the internet, whilst specifically introducing them to valuable reporting mechanisms for abuse, including sexual abuse.

In **Africa**, World Vision has been working to end various forms of abuse: child soldiers in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), gender-based violence in the DRC, and trafficking and sexual exploitation on rubber plantations in West Africa. We have also provided child protection training for law enforcement agencies in Rwanda, Ethiopia and Kenya. In 2005, we worked with the Kenyan government to produce guidelines for establishing and operating community child protection structures through Area Advisory Councils, which deal with child rights issues at the community level.⁸



Children listen carefully to a lesson and television programme warning about trafficking and sexual exploitation, packing the room to overflowing. At a children’s club in Cambodia, children learn about the dangers of sexual exploitation, trafficking and AIDS, receive non-formal education and leadership training, and have fun playing games together.

photo: Jon Warren/World Vision

“adolescents”. For the purpose of this paper, we use the term “youth” when specifically referring to those young people aged 18–24.

The challenges, recommendations and strategies identified in this paper stem from World Vision’s conviction that **responses to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children must be child-focused.**

A child-focused response

A child-focused approach to addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation prioritises the rights and well-being of children. It also ensures that all efforts start by considering the risks as well as the opportunities for protection that exist within the specific context of their families and communities.

This approach puts children at the heart of prevention, protection and prosecution efforts. It accords children a central role in identifying emerging forms of exploitation and ideas for addressing them.

Being child-focused means remembering, prioritising and starting with the poorest and most vulnerable children, and seeking to empower all young people together with their families and communities to promote children’s protection and to hold their governments accountable for upholding children’s rights.

Box 2: A child-focused response to sexual abuse and exploitation: key elements

1. **Children are viewed as the “starting point”** Contribute to children’s well-being and the progressive fulfilment of children’s rights, while measuring success by the impact on children
2. **Children are viewed as part of the communities around them** Understand children’s roles within their families, communities and societies and the roles that parents and other care-givers have in defending their children’s rights
3. **Children are viewed as social actors and agents of transformation** Place children at the heart of efforts aimed at prevention, protection and prosecution and accord them a central role in identifying emerging forms of exploitation and ideas for addressing them
4. **Children are viewed holistically** Consider all developmental dimensions of a child while making strategic choices and setting priorities
5. **Children, families and communities are empowered** Seek to empower children, families and communities primarily in relation to promoting protective environments for children and holding governments to account in upholding children’s rights
6. **Aligned to the UN CRC** Follow the standards and guiding principles that are set out in the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*



Street children participate at the International Anti-trafficking Day organised by a network of local and international non-governmental organisations in Albania. More than 80% of street children work mostly during the day, hence the school drop-out rate is high among them. Children are suffering from domestic abuse, trafficking and child labour, but silence prevails on such topics. The voices of innocent children tell a different story. *photo: Gerta Yzeiraj Hagen/World Vision*

challenges in implementing a child-focused response

I. Listening to children

World Vision's experience working at the forefront of child protection efforts in some of the most difficult contexts has taught us that children and youth are key agents of change and transformation in their communities. They have unique insights into the risks facing children and ways to address these. Moreover, all children have a right to express their views in all matters that affect them and for these views to be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".⁹ As such, children must be heard and included as equal partners in addressing their exploitation and abuse. This was recognised in the second World Congress in 2001, which aimed to include young people when discussing the issues, challenges and appropriate solutions to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

World Vision's consultation with young people and others around issues of exploitation and violence¹⁰ has shown that young people are best placed to identify both threats and potential solutions to ensure that they live free from this affliction.

In preparation for World Congress III we recognised the need to ensure that children and youth were given the chance to participate and to express their thoughts and feelings about child sexual exploitation through discussion and art. We therefore facilitated focus group discussions across the globe with over 200 young people (aged 10–21).¹¹

One child from Thailand explained, "Children have more understanding about issues that affect them – kids understand how other kids are hurt and help adults find the solutions." Another child from Romania said, "Most often children have different perspectives on things. Adults could discover things that they didn't think of or didn't consider as being important, by talking to children and young people." As such, if we are to stand any chance of winning the fight

against child sexual exploitation and abuse, we must listen to young people.

At all levels, we must view children and youth as equal participants in efforts to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of children.

2. Including the "forgotten" children

As we have seen, a child-focused response to abuse is based upon the guiding principles of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, which includes the principle of non-discrimination. This means that all children have equal rights to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation and that all measures aimed at protection, redress and care must be applicable to all children without discrimination. Yet it is often the most vulnerable,¹² those who need special attention and intervention, that are forgotten. World Vision is particularly concerned that inadequate attention is given to the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys.

Though the sexual abuse of boys has existed in every culture throughout history, it is a topic that is largely ignored. As Alastair Hilton observes in the recently published Hagar and World Vision report on the sexual abuse of boys in Cambodia, whilst "our attention to the needs of girls is well deserved...we have been largely silent and unresponsive to the needs of boys as both victims and survivors of sexual abuse".¹³

A review of existing research reveals that the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys is a serious problem around the world. In Cambodia, significant numbers of boys are abused by adults (Cambodian and foreign), by other children, by youth and, in some cases, by women.¹⁴

A study of child sex tourism in Thailand showed that in Patong, boys are the ones who are predominantly exploited

through commercial sex and that “paedophile activity is almost exclusively limited to sex with young teenage boys”.¹⁵ A report from Mexico found that the prostitution of male adolescents has re-emerged, mainly in theatres featuring pornographic films.¹⁶ At the same time, research into the experiences of children displaced by conflict in the Great Lakes Region of Africa revealed that sexual abuse could happen to any child, including males¹⁷ (see Box 3 below for one boy’s account of such abuse).

Box 3: Sexual abuse of boys in Lugufu Refugee camp, Tanzania*

“There is a woman in our village where I am being fostered. Whenever I returned from school or playing football, she would tell me I am a good boy, and that she loves such good hard-working children. One day, when people were not at home, she called me to help repair a wooden bed in her house. I went and helped her. After I had finished she grabbed me and asked me to have sex with her. I resisted. She was a very old woman. She insisted and overpowered me. I had to do it. I later learnt that she had been doing this to many children of my age in Lugufu. She was caught one day doing the same thing to another boy.”

* A boy of 15 recounted this experience during a focus group discussion in Lugufu II Refugee camp, Tanzania.¹⁸

Given these examples, it is not surprising that boys are themselves beginning to call on “society to take the protection of boys seriously and recognise that they too are vulnerable to abuse and feel great shame and loss of honour”.¹⁹

There are many reasons for the failure to respond to the abuse of boys but perhaps the most obvious is that boys, and particularly male youths, “are expected to be able to protect themselves and/or overcome it very quickly”.²⁰

In addition, there is a tendency to label boys and young men as potential abusers rather than recognising their own particular vulnerabilities. This is due to the fact that adolescent boys are “more likely to express their pressures and frustrations in negative, violent ways”²¹ and because “the most commonly reported perpetrators of sexual violence towards girls were male family members (brothers, uncles), followed by stepfathers, fathers and female family members”.²²

Responses to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children must not continue to fail these boys or other forgotten groups.

We must make efforts to remember those who are particularly vulnerable, such as children without parental care, who are

living in extreme poverty, who are disabled, abused/neglected, living or working on the street, undocumented, migrant, displaced, or who are affected by conflict.

We must ensure that all children are valued equally and afforded equal rights to protection, redress and care.

3. Developing and enforcing legislation that prioritises the rights of children

According to the UN *CRC*, “In all actions concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.²³ As such, if legislation to combat the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is to be child-focused, it must ensure the “best interests” principle is foundational in enforcing such legislation.

According to ECPAT International, although mid-term reviews of the *Stockholm Declaration and Agenda for Action* (formulated at the first World Congress in 1996) demonstrated a “positive movement to amend or enact new laws to protect children”, these were not complemented by improved enforcement or a sufficient focus on the care of child survivors.²⁴

World Vision’s own research has shown that law enforcement agencies often fail to deal with child survivors appropriately “because the agencies themselves are ill-informed and inadequately trained”.²⁵ In other instances, laws were not enforced due to corruption and the use of bribes.²⁶

Indeed, in the focus groups we held in the run up to World Congress III, many young people identified how law enforcement agencies often failed to put children first or to provide adequate care and protection in responding to their sexual abuse and exploitation. When asked how police should respond to the issue, one child survivor in Cambodia answered, “Do not threaten, blame or use bad words to victims – especially, child victims.” Another young person from Thailand noted, “Police have a vested interest in the sex industry, as brokers and customers; prior to a raid they advise the karaoke bar owners so that the under-age girls can be moved.”

Governments must ensure that robust, child-centred legal provisions exist to combat the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and are enforced nationally and internationally with the highest regard for the rights and well-being of the child.

4. Addressing contextual factors and recognising multiple stakeholders

Though the challenges above have focused particularly on the roles of children, law enforcement and government in responding to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, a child-focused response must also be contextualised to the situation of children within their families and wider communities. Strongly enforced child-centered legislation is essential, but it is insufficient without addressing other root causes of sexual exploitation.

A child-focused approach recognises that “the cultural and social norms, and economic and political environment that children experience greatly influence their behaviours, vulnerabilities, skills and aspirations, and other competencies”.²⁷

As such, multiple stakeholders need to engage in protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation and call for immediate action at every level, to ensure that children’s behaviours, vulnerabilities, skills and aspirations are impacted by their environment in a way that assures their rights to protection and promotes their well-being.

There is a myriad of economic, social and cultural factors that increase the vulnerability of children, and multiple stakeholders involved in their protection. Some are identified here.

Poverty

It has long been recognised that poverty can increase the vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation.²⁸ Stories of parents knowingly selling their children to traffickers may be the extreme, but in reality many poor families are compelled to send their children out to work, even if it means putting them at risk of abuse and exploitation.

As one child from Bosnia and Herzegovina observed in our focus groups, “people have to go and search for [a] job and then they get exploited”. Though survival is often the driving factor, parents or children may desire non-essential items, which can also lead to exploitation when “perpetrators show off luxurious materials like cell phones, or money, or other valuable things such as jewellery, which poor people also want to have.” Children and youth are also susceptible to these pressures and, in the words of one young person from Thailand, may be drawn into abuse “because of media and the desire for new technology and things”.



Tosha is the Vice Chairperson of her school’s Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Sexual Exploitation (SGBV/SE) Students’ Committee, in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, Tanzania. She was supported by World Vision’s SGBV/SE programme when she became pregnant at 15 and dropped out of school. Now, she works to help prevent gender-based abuse, provide a safe forum where students can report abuse, and support young people affected by violence or sexual exploitation to resume their education.
photo: Delphina Ntangeki/World Vision

Given these effects of poverty, attention must be given to the potential impact of the current global food and financial crises on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. People living in poverty spend between 60–80% of their income on food;²⁹ 862 million people were hungry even before prices went up.³⁰ The spiralling cost of staple foods radically alters their ability to meet basic nutritional requirements and to keep hold of their assets, making children especially vulnerable not only to malnutrition and developmental problems but also to increased pressure to engage in transactional sex. Children may be called upon to support their families, while those without parental care are doubly vulnerable.

Early marriage

In many parts of the world, child or early marriage is also a real concern. Often justified as a cultural norm, and legally-sanctioned in some countries, this practice constitutes a form of sexual abuse and may even be termed commercial

exploitation where “a child is to be used for sexual purposes, through marriage, in exchange for cash, goods or kind”.³¹

In some cases, child marriage is “a thinly-veiled form of Child Sex Tourism...where a national from one country travels to another country to marry a minor (in this case always girls) in exchange for money...spends a week with the girl but then abandons her”.³²

However, even if early marriage remains within the confines of a community, it is becoming increasingly commercial in nature. In Vanuatu, an island in the South Pacific, it was found that “with the introduction of a cash economy, the bride has become more of a commodity than a symbol of positive social relations as she is exchanged for money rather than culturally or socially significant items”.³³

In times of hardship, such as the current global food and financial crises, selling a daughter into early marriage may be seen as the only way to survive. Even very young girls, younger than normally acceptable, are being used in this way.³⁴

Globalisation, media, technology and pornography

Recent media and technological trends and the increase of pornography have contributed to cultural pressures that sexualise children and normalise sex at an early age. Globalisation has encouraged such trends to affect wider groups, including children.

Box 4: Laura’s story, Mexico*

“I was living with my mum, off and on. But my brothers had started abusing me when I was about five years old. My brother would say, “Can I come to your room?” He would say he was going to help me learn the multiplication tables, and I thought he would, that he would help me. But he would come in and abuse me, and the other one would stand at the door to make sure no one was coming. I left and came home later, but within just three days, the abuse started happening again. And I never said anything to my mum. She would tell me that I had to be a virgin when I got married and she would say that when a woman was abused, she was dirty. So one day I left home and I never went back.

I knew some girls who would also use drugs, and when they didn’t have any, they would prostitute themselves. Later I realised that they were giving me drugs, and while I was ‘out of it’, they were selling my body to the men. I was angry and I resented those men, and they would say, ‘If you say anything to the police or your mum, we’ll kill you.’ But the girls who were selling me would later tell me: ‘The men ran away and they didn’t give us anything,’ and I realised that the girls were ripping me off.”

* Laura, aged 16, was interviewed at a shelter in Mexico.³⁵

Children report that they feel pressure to imitate what they see on television, hear in music or see on the internet. A boy from a World Vision focus group discussion in Uganda explained, “people go for pornography on TV and internet. Watching these makes them experiment to see if it is good.” One child in Vietnam shared how exposure through media can affect young people: “Children are curious about film images, internet, about the world outside that make them vulnerable to commercial and sexual exploitation.” A young person in Thailand observed, “Children enter prostitution through being tricked, copying the media, peer pressure, being led into the industry by a false relative or imitating pornography.”

As access to the internet continues to grow and technology makes pornographic material increasingly available, more and more children are becoming vulnerable to this form of abuse.³⁵ A recent report by World Vision Cambodia, identified the exposure of children “to various forms of hardcore pornography and often at an early age” which can lead to “gender-based violence, the use of commercial sex workers, the spread of HIV and AIDS, and the rape of children by perpetrators who are themselves often minors”.³⁶

Non-commercial forms of sexual abuse and exploitation

Child sexual abuse applies to all instances of children being forced or coerced into sexual activity, usually by “someone who is responsible for them, or has power over them, that they should be able to trust”.³⁷ Not confined to physical acts, such abuse includes exposure to pornography, sex acts and the use of suggestive or improper sexual language. Whether it occurs in the home, at school or in settings which make children particularly vulnerable (such as war zones, refugee camps, residential institutions), sexual abuse has a devastating impact and “can increase the likelihood of a child subsequently becoming commercially sexually exploited”³⁸ (see Laura’s story in Box 4 for an example).

Many young people who participated in the World Vision focus group discussions describe rape as beginning a cycle leading to commercial sexual exploitation. Children in Cambodia observed, “Domestic violence [including sexual abuse] pushes children to leave their home and end up in situations where they are sexually exploited, sometimes in brothels.”

Although sexual abuse occurs in a variety of settings, research suggests that children are most vulnerable to abuse by “family members or other people residing in or visiting a child’s

family home”.³⁹ Part of the problem, as highlighted in World Vision’s 2002 study on abuse and neglect, is that “while the majority of cultures maintain taboos against extreme violence and incest, acceptable parenting standards can include beatings, emotional neglect and questionable sexual contact”.⁴⁰ Affecting both boys and girls, this abuse is most often hidden behind closed doors, cloaked by “shame, secrecy and denial” which fosters “a pervasive culture of silence”.⁴¹

Even if sexually abused by someone outside of the home, such as a teacher or soldier or NGO worker in a refugee camp, children are unlikely to seek help due to feelings of shame and embarrassment and out of fear of reprisal or stigmatisation. Recognising this, one young focus group participant from Cambodia stressed that “parents must not keep silent if a rape case happens in the family or village” and another from Vietnam felt that parents should “encourage children to speak up in order to learn whether a child is abused”.

Although historically the main focus of the international community and the World Congresses has been on the **commercial** sexual exploitation of children, efforts to address this abuse will fail if we do not address the sexual exploitation and abuse of young people more widely. Since the commercial sexual exploitation of children is often linked to non-commercial forms of abuse, including intra-familial violence,⁴² a more holistic and systemic approach is needed if commercial forms are to be effectively addressed. This year’s focus and revised title of the World Congress III reflects this truism.

As we have seen, a child-focused approach to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children recognises that the risks children face must be identified and addressed within the context of their lives, while also considering the assets and protective factors surrounding them. Consequently, World Vision believes that family members and communities are key players in the fight against the sexual abuse of children. As such, they must be engaged and educated to overcome this abuse instead of sometimes even participating in the sexual exploitation of their children.

We must ensure that long-term structural vulnerabilities and root causes of sexual exploitation are addressed in addition to strongly enforced child-centred legislation.

We must view the protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation as everyone’s responsibility; efforts must be intensified to develop protective environments for children at every level.

Trends in the sexual exploitation of children:

- Children and youth are already working to combat sexual exploitation.
- The global food crisis does and will increase the vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation, including early marriage.
- Many law enforcement agencies are failing to deal with child survivors appropriately and many laws fail to be enforced due to corruption.
- The sexual abuse of boys is largely ignored.
- Growing access to the internet and technological advances mean more and more children are becoming vulnerable to sexual abuse in the form of pornography.
- The cycle of commercial sexual abuse of children is beginning in the home.



In Laos, World Vision consults with vulnerable communities on how to address their risks of trafficking and support activities that will lead to safer communities. Attended by nearly 150 students from the primary and lower secondary school in the village, this awareness event sought to teach the children the dangers of unsafe migration and the risks of being trafficked by recruiters. Thirteen-year-old Mahaxay (right) chants “Don’t believe recruiters! Don’t believe recruiters!” with her classmates.

photo: Albert Yu/World Vision

conclusion

A child-focused approach to combating the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is rooted in the belief that efforts to address the issue must be multi-faceted, multi-layered and centred around the rights and well-being of children.

Families, communities, civil society including faith-based organisations and NGOs, governments, the private sector, police, the judiciary and children themselves must all be involved if we are to successfully combat these horrendous violations of children and their rights.

Though strongly enforced child-centred legislation is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own. Long-term structural vulnerabilities and root causes must be addressed by innovative policy measures. Protective environments must also be strengthened through

engaging with families and communities and the wider contexts in which children live.

Above all, children, including those who have been traditionally forgotten, must be central to all responses and must be listened to; their perspectives can pave the way to identifying emerging manifestations of exploitation and abuse and to developing more creative, holistic and effective responses. Once we put children at the centre we can make real progress.

World Vision, like the children of the world, is counting on the members of World Congress III to adopt a child-focused approach that puts children at the centre in order to help renew and refocus all our efforts to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation in the 21st Century.



Young people in Latin America are consulted about the sexual exploitation of children
photo: World Vision

endnotes

- 1 Name has been changed
- 2 World Vision International, *Commercial child sexual exploitation (Mexico): Series on child labour and exploitation in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2008
- 3 United Nations, *Report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children*, 2006, para 28, p 10
- 4 UNICEF estimates that at least 1.8 million children are involved in the commercial sex trade alone. UNICEF, *Children and the Millennium Development Goals: Progress towards a world fit for children*, p 68
- 5 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, *Report of the expert consultation meeting in preparation for World Congress III Against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents*, 2008, p 8
- 6 World Vision International, *Here we stand: World Vision and Child Rights*, 2007
- 7 During August and September 2008, World Vision staff facilitated focus group discussions (FGDs) on this issue involving over 200 young people, aged 10–21, from around the world. See World Vision, *Kids understand how kids hurt: Children and adolescents speak out about sexual exploitation*, 2008
- 8 World Vision signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Kenyan government to establish and strengthen Area Advisory Councils (AACs), which deal with orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and child rights issues at a community level in 35 districts.
- 9 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, Article 12
- 10 For example: the Mekong Youth Forum 2007 in Thailand which was supported by World Vision's Regional Advocacy anti-Child Trafficking Project; *Faces of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean*, a 2002 World Vision International recording of children's stories from across the region to present a brief but comprehensive picture of the causes and effects of violence
- 11 Focus group discussions took place in Thailand, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Lesotho. The opinions of youth in Costa Rica and Colombia, which were gathered in 2007, were also considered.
- 12 Evidence shows that some population groups are typically more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. These include children who are: without parental care; in extreme poverty; abused/neglected; living or working on the street; undocumented; disabled; migrant or displaced; and affected by conflict.
- 13 A Hilton and Social Services of Cambodia (SSC), for Hagar and World Vision Cambodia and World Vision Canada, "I thought it could never happen to boys": *Sexual abuse and exploitation of boys in Cambodia. An exploratory study*, 2008
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- 20 *ibid.*
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- 19 *ibid.*, p 8
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appendix:

Suggested actions for achieving made in this

1. At all levels, we must view children and youth as equal participants in efforts to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of children.

- **Governments** must act immediately to pursue solutions through designing opportunities for young people to voice their problems and communicate their ideas for workable solutions.
- **Governments** must ensure that young people are represented and listened to on local and national bodies charged with developing and implementing the National Plan of Action to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.
- **Governments** must involve child advocates when formulating policies and laws and in the reporting and monitoring of international instruments upholding children's rights to protection, such as the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* and its Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography,⁴⁴ and the UN *Human Rights Council (HRC) Universal Periodic Review*.
- **Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society** must work with governments and young people to find ways to help children and youth to express themselves in the best and most appropriate manner in secure environments.

2. We must ensure that all children are valued equally and afforded equal rights to protection, redress and care.

- **Governments** must act immediately to withdraw legislation or policies that discriminate against certain groups of children (including on the grounds of nationality, ethnicity, gender, ability, lack of documentation, criminal history, etc.) and are contrary to the universal rights of children to protection and care outlined in the UN *CRC*.

- Responses to the sexual exploitation of children must be gender sensitive and inclusive. In particular, **national governments and NGOs** must work to educate those who are in contact with vulnerable children that boys are also subject to sexual abuse and exploitation.
- **NGOs** must work with communities to challenge discriminatory attitudes towards certain children (e.g. disabled children, girls, children of ethnic minorities) and promote the human rights of all children.
- **NGOs, governments and the private sector** should work together to ensure that information on all forms of abuse and the related reporting mechanisms are available to children in formats and languages they can easily understand.
- **Governments, NGOs and civil society** should partner to ensure all children have appropriate and quality rehabilitative care and reintegration into strong family or family-like situations after they have survived abuse.

3. Governments must ensure that robust, child-centred legal provisions exist to combat the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and are enforced nationally and internationally with the highest regard for the rights and well-being of the child.

- **Law enforcement agencies and the judiciary** must not treat young people who have been subject to sexual exploitation as criminals.
- **National and local level authorities and law enforcement** must encourage young people to report abuse through the introduction of child-friendly reporting systems and to ensure their care and protection throughout the legal process in line with the UN *CRC*.
- **National and local level authorities** must adopt and implement a policy of “zero tolerance” against corruption and bribery of those involved in the enforcement of legislation.
- At regional and international levels, **governments and law**

and strategies the recommendations paper

enforcement agencies must work together to harmonise legislation and procedures related to the sexual exploitation of children, the age of consent and prosecution of abusers.

- **Governments and law enforcement agencies** must enhance the flow of information and co-operation between countries to ensure greater protection for children and more successful prosecution of foreign offenders.

4. We must ensure that long-term structural vulnerabilities and root causes of sexual exploitation are addressed in addition to strongly enforced child-centred legislation.

- **Governments** must ensure that all children have access to compulsory and free education. The national education curriculum needs to adopt a life skills curriculum that protects children through educating them about their rights and the forms that exploitation can take. This will prepare young people with livelihood skills, teach gender equity, and empower them to resist coercive and fraudulent offers from those looking to exploit them.
- **Governments** must ensure greater protection for children who try to escape poverty and end up in abusive situations. Job skills training and employment opportunities are needed. Specialist services must be established to allow them to be repatriated and reintegrated by their communities so they are no longer vulnerable to exploitation.
- **Governments** must support families through creating just and favourable economic climates that work to end poverty and eliminate dependency on child labour. **Governments and civil society** should partner to provide job training and education opportunities for parents and young people, as well as social services and information sharing so that parents and guardians are able to build safe, financially stable and protective environments for their children.

- **Governments** must actively outlaw cultural practices that promote the sexual exploitation of children.

5. We must view the protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation as everyone's responsibility; efforts must be intensified to develop protective environments for children at every level.

- **NGOs and governments** must build children's capacity to protect themselves from commercial sexual exploitation. Through non-formal and formal education initiatives and the teaching of life skills, young people become aware of their rights as well as the dangers of exploitation.
- **NGOs and governments** must work together and with local communities and civil society to create a sense of mutual shared responsibility for the protection of children and to ensure that all citizens have the tools to identify and report instances of sexual abuse and exploitation.
- **Governments** must ensure that strong child protection systems are in place at the international and national level and enhanced through child protection networks at the community level.
- **All lawyers, judges, prosecutors and police** must receive mandatory training to understand and apply legislation in gender-sensitive and child-centred ways.
- **Parents and guardians** must recognise the critical role they play in protecting children and creating loving home environments that help prevent abuse and exploitation.
- **Internet service providers** must introduce effective blocking and filtering to prevent images of child sexual abuse from being hosted online and to protect children from accessing adult pornography.
- By the 21st anniversary of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* in 2010, all **governments** must ratify and domesticate the Optional Protocol to UN *CRC* on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

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putting children at the centre

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