A Growing Partnership

With only one thousand days to go to reach the Millennium Development Goals, it is imperative that the World Bank and UNICEF, with other partners, accelerate efforts to support governments in advancing their development goals. The two institutions are increasingly working together and building on each other’s strengths to accelerate progress in achieving greater equity and results for the most vulnerable. As noted in the 2012 Annual Report to ECOSOC, the engagement of UNICEF country offices with the Bank has steadily and significantly increased from five years earlier, to 84 percent in 2011 and 88 percent in 2012. Over the years, the partnership with the World Bank has also leveraged significant resources, including $944 million in Bank financing for UNICEF-provided procurement services.

When the Executive Board adopted UNICEF’s first Strategic Framework for Partnerships and Collaborative Relationships in 2009, it requested that the Framework be expanded to include multilateral institutions. In September 2012, the discussion on the implementation of the Framework made it clear that the Board wanted to learn more about UNICEF’s collaboration with the International Financial Institutions. The Special Focus Session on 5 February will offer an opportunity to better understand the collaboration between UNICEF and the World Bank, and explore ways to deepen the partnership.

Monitoring Progress and Achieving Equitable Results, Together

The past two decades have witnessed measurable progress towards the MDGs. The target of reducing extreme poverty by half has been reached five years ahead of the 2015 deadline, as has the target of halving the proportion of people who lack dependable access to improved sources of drinking water. Primary school enrolment of girls has now equaled that of boys, and we have seen accelerating progress in reducing child and maternal mortality. Measuring this progress is in part possible thanks to organizations such as the World Bank and UNICEF partnering to conduct and improve MDG monitoring.

Yet much remains to be done – many are still left behind. Both organizations are committed to achieving equitable results for those hardest to reach, as a key strategy to accelerate progress towards the MDGs.

Those hardest to reach are most often in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Children in these countries are more than three times as likely to be unable to go to school; they are twice as likely to die before age five; and more than twice as likely to lack clean water. Eight of the 10 countries with the highest under-five mortality are fragile and conflict-affected. Becoming better at joining forces in those contexts is an important aspect of a strengthened World Bank-UNICEF collaboration that accelerates progress towards the MDGs.
Building on Global and on the Ground Collaboration

UNICEF and the World Bank are actively involved in many global initiatives that translate into tangible results for children’s well-being at the country level. The two organizations partner in the areas of education; social protection; health; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); early childhood development; and others. A scaled-up partnership should build on lessons learned from these successful collaborations that demonstrate significant results on the ground.

One such example is the global partnership Sanitation and Water for All (SWA). It brings together countries and organizations supporting the achievement of the MDG targets and progress towards universal access to sanitation and drinking water. At the 2012 SWA High Level Meeting convened by UNICEF and hosted by the World Bank, 45 developing countries and donors made tangible commitments to increase resources, improve monitoring of results, and to develop credible plans based on sound analysis. Support coming out of this partnership is largely focused on countries off-track to reach water and sanitation goals by 2015. For example, in Liberia, UNICEF and the Water and Sanitation Programme of the World Bank worked under the Government’s leadership to develop the “Liberia WASH Compact”. To do so, the two organizations jointly undertook a mapping of drinking water infrastructure across the country using SMS technology and spatial mapping software. This data provides the evidence base for the Government to make decisions on how to provide services to the poorest and most vulnerable people. It is publicly available, enabling citizens to hold the Government to account on the delivery of services.

Another illustration is a joint effort in support of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. Under this partnership, the World Bank has, since 2003, pioneered a debt buy-down financing mechanism in support of national polio eradication programmes. Through this innovative financing mechanism, a third party donor pays off the World Bank credit on behalf of the Government, thereby converting credit to grant and increasing the flexibility and cost-efficiency of funding. Both Nigeria and Pakistan have used such funds for the procurement of oral polio vaccine, with UNICEF providing procurement services support. As of October 2012, the financing mechanism allowed for the procurement of over US$400 million worth of vaccine, and enabled the partnership to provide children with more than 2 billion doses in the two countries over the last ten years.

The School Fee Abolition Initiative, launched in 2005 by the World Bank and UNICEF, supported countries in the pursuit of better access to basic education to meet the MDGs and Education for All targets by removing education cost barriers for poor parents and households. The partners first analysed the impact of school fee abolition in countries such as Kenya, which introduced free primary education in 2003 and saw primary school enrolments rise from 5.9 million to 7.1 million in the following year. The experience of Kenya and other countries highlighted that removing school fees should be complemented by efforts to prevent classroom crowding, deterioration in education quality, and further strain on education budgets. This analysis was later applied to countries such as Ghana, which abolished school fees progressively between 2004 and 2006, resulting in a more gradual increase in the number of children in school, from 2.7 million in 2003 to 3.4 million in 2006.
Exploring Opportunities to Scale Up the UNICEF-World Bank Partnership

Looking forward, joint efforts in many areas focus on equitable results for children. UNICEF and the World Bank share a strong commitment to accelerating progress towards the health MDGs and ending preventable child deaths, under the revitalized International Health Partnership and through initiatives such as A Promise Renewed. In education, building on positive experience of joint work, the two organizations launched the Simulations for Equity in Education project to identify cost-effective strategies for reaching children who are excluded from or underserved by education systems. UNICEF and the World Bank are also identifying common ground between their social protection systems approaches to provide coherent support to governments. Through this effort, the partners jointly contribute to strengthening the capacity of 17 African countries in designing and implementing cash transfers for poor and vulnerable children and families.

During the Special Focus Session of the UNICEF Executive Board, Dr. Jim Yong Kim and Anthony Lake will outline common engagement by the two organizations. There will also be a short video presenting the work undertaken by UNICEF and the World Bank around innovative social services for the most vulnerable in Haiti; community health extension programmes in Ethiopia; accountability from the bottom up through social media, text messaging and visualization in Uganda; and the strengthening of national capacity on nutrition in Indonesia. A discussion with the Board will offer an opportunity to explore ways of scaling up this partnership to achieve better and more equitable results for children around the world.