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# A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH TO THE PROMOTION OF CHILD RIGHTS IN GEORGIA – A CASE STUDY



*The Georgian Model of a whole-of-society approach is a very innovative way to move forward children's rights. It involves the authorities, municipalities, civil society organizations, international community, academia and individuals to promote the shared ethical norms, principles and values of society.*

*Philippe Cori, UNICEF Deputy Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia*



The Georgian Model of Child Rights Promotion is based on a whole-of-society approach. The objective is to create a culture of child rights that is owned, promoted and supported by an entire society, rather than a programmatic approach driven solely by UNICEF and its traditional partners.

The Model demonstrates the fortified use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in everyday practice, with the CRC positioned at the very heart of the strategic approach. It has created a pool of child rights champions across society, including parliamentarians, academia, religious leaders, professional groups and children and young people – all of whom are ready and equipped to further spread knowledge and information on child rights. As the Model is non-political and non-sectarian, it has the potential to unite every part of society in a common cause: the children of Georgia.



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## WHY THE MODEL WAS NEEDED



*Keeping the CRC central to our work led to a very powerful Code on the Rights of the Child of Georgia, which UNICEF is using as a vehicle for social cohesion.*

*Ghassan Khalil, UNICEF Representative in Georgia*



The Model began its life during the process of drafting of Georgia's Code on the Rights of the Child, which embodies the principles of the CRC. The Code faced serious opposition from some Parliamentarians, from politically conservative groups and radical orthodox groups, which threatened its development and its potential impact.

In response to this threat, UNICEF Georgia launched a constructive, open and respectful dialogue with all key players, including those opposed to the Code, to tackle myths and misunderstandings about child rights. Building on its reputation as a neutral and non-political 'honest broker', UNICEF was able to discuss controversial and sensitive topics and foster consensus on the contents of the Code.

The adoption of the Code in 2019 was a major step forward. However its adoption alone was not enough to guarantee its translation into action for children. An approach was needed that would embed the Code and its principles, particularly the best interests of the child, across society. Therefore, the new UNICEF Country Programme, launched in 2021, aimed not only to reinforce the centrality of the CRC across UNICEF's own programming, but also to mobilize the whole of society around child rights, with the CRC as the central strategic tool.

This required a shift in mind-set and working practices. While child rights had long been part of UNICEF Georgia's 'DNA', there had been a focus on building the capacity of separate groups of professionals on specific programmatic areas. The Country Office recognized that its programmatic work would not become self-sustaining or have the desired impact unless reinforced by a strong child rights culture. The training of professionals, for example, would have a more lasting impact if it instilled respect for, and an understanding of, child rights.

## THE STRATEGIC PROCESS

UNICEF Georgia moved away from siloed approaches and expanded its horizons by using integrated, cross-sectoral approaches. New stakeholders, including religious leaders, academia and the business sector, were identified to spread child rights ideals across Georgia alongside UNICEF's more traditional partners.

The aim has been to mobilize partnerships around child rights, building a nationwide cadre of child rights champions to work at every level of society. This means working with stakeholders who are trusted, who have regular contact with people in their communities, and whose combined reach spans the entire country. This approach is more sustainable, effective and efficient than attempts by any single entity to address child rights through sectoral siloes.

The Georgian Model enables knowledge about child rights to flow out into communities from the country's Parliament, government offices, its places of worship, and its universities and schools. It spans every level of government, as well as Parliament, the judiciary, academia, religious communities, civil society organizations, human rights monitoring institutions, the media and the private sector. Importantly, it includes children and young people as key stakeholders, as well as UNICEF's own staff.



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### At national level



*UNICEF worked with all actors bringing them around the CRC and the Code, which made child rights closer to the hearts of everyone.*

*Mikheil Sarjveladze, Chair of the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee*



UNICEF has worked alongside Parliament, Government ministries and the Judiciary to bring Georgian legislation in line with the requirements of the Code.

Coordination mechanisms were strengthened across central ministries as well as with local municipalities to uphold children's rights, and enhance the child rights focus of professionals who work with children.

UNICEF has acted as a convener throughout this process, bringing together and enhancing coordination across all key stakeholders.

Parliamentarians went through intensive training on child rights – as well as the permanent staff of Georgia's Parliament – and many of them are now child rights advocates. A Permanent Parliamentary Council on Child Rights Protection was established to oversee the implementation of the Code and enhance children's participation in decision-making processes, and monitoring tools have been developed to support this oversight function.

UNICEF's work to promote the Model has extended to professionals in different ministries and agencies across many sectors, including child protection, education and health, among many others. The Model also includes support for the Judiciary on the implementation of the Code on the Rights of the Child and the Juvenile Justice Code of Georgia: both of which emphasize the CRC and the best interests of the child principle, to create a truly child-friendly justice system. As a result of UNICEF-supported training and guidance, child rights champions can now be found in Georgia's court system, and child-friendly processes, spaces and resources have been established for the Legal Aid Service.

Ambassadors were actively engaged in reinforcing child rights, with a crucial role of the EU Ambassador in supporting the development of the Code on the Rights of the Child in Georgia. The Ambassadors highlighted the importance of child rights with key decision-makers and promoted child rights while meeting with communities.

### **At local level, including rural and ethnic minority populated communities**



***The Gorge has never seen a visit of so many and such high-ranking guests. Visit of the ambassadors of the European countries and their interest in our problems means that Europe takes an interest in the well-being of our country, our region – no matter which region, today it is Pankisi. It is obvious that this visit will be written in the history of the Gorge as one of the most important events***

*Khaso Khangoshvili, Member of the Elder's Council of Pankisi*



In 2022, UNICEF strengthened its partnerships with municipalities. Mayors of 10 municipalities signed a symbolic pledge to develop social programmes tailored to the needs of children and families, in collaboration with relevant government ministries. Mayors, deputy mayors, municipal social departments and child protection and support units have been driving the Model in their communities.



A number of Georgian cities have committed to promote child rights through their engagement in the Child-friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI).

UNICEF also expanded engagement with ethnic minority groups living in different regions to build a child rights culture in these areas. In Pankisi Gorge, for example, UNICEF has worked to promote a child rights culture through the empowerment and

engagement of children, particularly youth, and strengthen community structures. The aim is to improve the environment that surrounds children so that they can reach their full potential and contribute to their communities. The promotion of the Model in this region has included the visit of a delegation of Ambassadors from 13 countries organized by UNICEF Georgia, to provide international development partners with a first-hand account of the needs of children and families whose lives have been affected by complex challenges.

## Working with academia



***We have signed memorandums with almost every school in Imereti Region. I think it would be good if such centres are opened at other schools as well, to provide us with ideas. These activities would promote child rights among parents, teachers, students, academic staff and other professionals.***

***Mamuli Buchukhishvili, Dean of the Pedagogical Faculty of Akaki Tsereteli State University***



A close partnership with academia aims to spread a child rights culture across Georgia's universities. A collaboration with seven State universities, launched in 2021, has led to the establishment of Child Rights Centre in each university. These active hubs carry information out to schools, bring children and teachers into the universities to provide them with resources on child rights, and generate evidence on child rights issues for informed and child-sensitive decisions by the Government and Parliament. The partnership has also included UNICEF-run professional development programmes for university professors on child rights, as well as the incorporation of child rights into university programmes for the training of teachers, who can then pass on their child rights knowledge to their students. In addition, resource centres for inclusive education have been set up within schools, under the guidance of, and with support from, the Child Rights Centres of State Universities.

The Child Rights Centre at Kutaisi University is now connected to 373 schools in the Imereti region. In addition, the city itself is a candidate for child-friendly city status, with its pursuit of this achievement supported by the University's Child Rights Centre.

The Model has created a virtuous circle of dissemination and learning on child rights, with research findings aiming to inform decision- and policy-making. The approach has attracted international interest, with Kutaisi, Batumi and Samtskhe-Javakheti State Universities hosting international conferences on the incorporation of child rights into university education curricula since the partnership was launched.

UNICEF is now supporting the development of a concept for the self-sustainability of the Child Rights Centres to enable them to continue their work. In addition, the Model has now spread to a number of private universities across Georgia. As a result of this snowball effect, more universities are now ready to establish Child Rights Centres.



## Working with religious leaders and communities



***A new understanding of the ways to prevent the challenges children face was important for many clergymen, enabling them to make a greater contribution to the creation of a sound environment for children and promoting their well-being in general.***

*Father Giorgi Pirtskhelani, Head of the Youth Direction of the Public Relations Unit of the Patriarchate of Georgia*



Another key aspect of the Model has been the mobilization of religious leaders across all major faiths, recognizing their critical role in child well-being, given their deep and close relationships with their communities, their respected status, and their strong influence on behaviour and attitudes. The in-depth capacity building of religious leaders from all denominations is creating a pool of child rights champions who have extensive connections and networks across Georgia's communities.

Some were deeply opposed to the Code during its development. Indeed, members of radical orthodox groups protested in significant numbers outside UNICEF's office in Tbilisi. UNICEF has addressed this opposition by engaging with religious leaders in person and continuously to build a common vision around child rights, increase understanding and knowledge of these rights, and 'unpack' child rights to dispel any myths about their meaning.

A meeting with the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) resulted in his blessing for the Code. This opened up new opportunities, not only to promote the adoption and implementation of the Code, but also to launch a widespread capacity building initiative for the training of GOC leaders on child rights.

This partnership has also influenced concrete actions by religious leaders, including the deinstitutionalization of children from Church-run residential care in South Georgia following allegations of child rights violations. UNICEF acted as a convener



on this issue, bringing together the GOC, the Government and the Public Defender's Office to identify solutions that were in the children's best interests.

A collaborative partnership has also been established between UNICEF and the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia. In collaboration with the Administration, UNICEF has organized workshops for Islamic leaders, including those from the high mountain areas of Adjara, to strengthen their role in protecting and promoting child rights.



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*The seminars for our religious leaders in Batumi were extremely impressive. We think that free, intelligent, spiritually well-nurtured future generations will save our country.*

*Adam Shantadze, Mufti from the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia*

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A close partnership has been established with the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church. UNICEF Georgia has also addressed the Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church and worked with the State Agency for Religious Issues (SARI) to bring leaders from different faiths together in February 2020 for a conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the CRC.

As a result of this intensive engagement, there was been a shift from open opposition to child rights to the dissemination of child-rights information from places of worship across Georgia. This has been complemented by a 2019 Memorandum of Understanding between the State Agency on Religious Issues and UNICEF.

### **Working with civil society organizations, including the media**

In addition to religious leaders and communities, UNICEF has been working with a wide range of other civil society organizations (CSOs), including professional groups, parents' associations and, importantly, the media. UNICEF has worked with CSOs – including young people's organizations – to enable them to incorporate child rights into their own programming. This has, in turn, guided their support to the most vulnerable children and families.

The Model has also featured the active engagement of media professionals to enhance child-friendly ethical reporting on child rights issues at every level. Its multilayered approach has improved the knowledge of media professionals on child rights and has, therefore, generated more ethical reporting on children.

### **Working with the private sector**

Collaboration with the private sector recognizes its crucial role in the implementation of the Code. It entails the promotion of child rights throughout business organizations and the incorporation of child rights into everyday business practices. An innovative platform has been created – the Business Advisory Council for Children (BACC) – to support the realization of children's rights in every workplace, marketplace and community. In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) aims to improve respect for child rights in business practices, including support for positive parenting for workers and the empowerment of young people to become more competitive in the labour market.



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## Working with children and young people



*When children know their rights from young age, they will know how to act, how to solve problems and I think this will help them when they grow up to face challenges they meet with ease*

*Ketevan Abramidze, a school student who raised awareness about child rights in her school, as part of cooperation with the Child Rights Centre at Akaki Tsereteli State University, Kutaisi*





***When I know what my rights are, I feel very powerful and protected.***

*Lizi Shengelia, a school student who participated in a training organized by Batumi State University's Child Rights Centre*



The Model is promoting the right of all children and young people to participate in the decisions that affect them. Indeed, their participation is essential for the success of the Model itself.

It is vital that they are aware of the Code, and that they are empowered to demand the fulfilment of the rights it promotes. They have been actively engaged in dialogues at municipal level to raise their awareness and to inform child-rights based programming. They have also been deeply involved in efforts to combat COVID-19, including peer-to-peer approaches to tackle disinformation. And their feedback has been integrated into strategies and action plans for municipalities that are pursuing Child-Friendly City status.

Young people have also been empowered with skills to promote child rights in their communities. A Youth Volunteer platform, for example, has been created to increase their civic engagement. The platform had united more than 3000 young volunteers by 2022, who had undertaken 1250 civic engagement projects. More than 200 adolescents who have been trained as Water Advocates have led more than 30 campaigns and events to improve water quality, water supply and sanitation facilities in their schools and communities. In Adjara region, the training of young scouts on child rights has built the capacity of around 2,000 adolescents on their rights and responsibilities.

### **Modelling a child rights culture within UNICEF**

As well as taking a leadership role on the promotion of the Code and the CRC, UNICEF Georgia has also modelled the change it wants to see across society within its own team. To ensure sustainability, all staff members are trained on child rights, including those working in operations, IT and human resources. As a result, all staff members are equipped to carry child rights messages and information out across the country, as well as into their own homes and communities. This has created a culture of child rights within the office that spans all sections – not only programming – to mirror the desired whole-of-society approach.

## Building the evidence-base

The Model includes the generation of data to inform policy, strengthen programmes, enhance advocacy and improve the monitoring of child rights in Georgia. The Public Defender's Office, for example, is monitoring the implementation of the CRC as well as the Code, with support from UNICEF to strengthen its monitoring capacity. It has issued reports on justice for children, children in state care, violence against children in schools, child labour, and the impact of COVID-19 on child rights. The National Statistics Office is also deeply engaged in enhancing the evidence base for the promotion of the Model.

Research by state universities and their Child Rights Centres has explored the mental health of university students and their access to relevant services. The data collected have been analyzed through a human rights lens, and the findings and recommendations will be presented to Georgia's Parliament in 2023. And in the framework of the Child-Friendly City Initiative (CFCI), three municipalities, Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi, have carried out child rights situation analyses.

## Reflections and lessons learned



***UNICEF Georgia has used its Model of Child Rights Promotion to great effect over the past four years of its Country Programme, mobilizing everyone it set out to mobilize. The key results to date reflect – as they should – the building and reinforcing of child-rights based mechanisms and approaches, rather than the quantifiable results of specific activities. They confirm the importance of a strategy based on a whole-of-society approach.***

*Ghassan Khalil, UNICEF Representative in Georgia*



**Ownership.** Georgia's Model of Child Rights Promotion does not aim to generate or document a mass of UNICEF-driven activities. Instead, it aims to build a holistic culture of child rights that becomes self-sustaining and deeply embedded to become part of Georgia's DNA. It is not, therefore, about UNICEF programming results: it is about letting go – passing the torch to others who are equipped to run with it as a result of UNICEF's initial support. This has implications for traditional monitoring and evaluation, given that – if the Model achieves its objectives in full – UNICEF will no longer be able to cite specific activities or outcomes as being UNICEF owned or driven.

**Leadership.** The Model has required passionate leadership at Country Office level, particularly during the initial stages. This has been essential to build momentum and gain traction. UNICEF's Representative in Georgia has often led the engagement with key stakeholders – including training – in person. He and his team have also travelled extensively throughout Georgia, debating highly sensitive issues not only supporters of the Code, but also with those most vehemently opposed to child rights to address any misunderstandings and build consensus.

**Leveraging UNICEF's reputation for neutrality.** Like many societies, Georgia is polarized along political (and sometime religious or ethnic) lines. The Model de-politicizes child rights, removing them from political agendas to form part of a non-partisan culture for every citizen. This matters in an era when human rights, including the rights of children, are increasingly challenged by populist and anti-democratic rhetoric.

**Leveraging UNICEF's reach to ensure inclusion.** The Model has also been a truly nationwide and fully inclusive endeavour, aided by UNICEF's strong reputation for impartiality. No part of Georgia has been 'off limits' for UNICEF teams and its child rights advocates. They have visited the Chechen community in Pankisi region, where customary law still applies. The team has listened to and addressed local concerns about child rights – something that would have been difficult for most Georgian politicians and Parliamentarians. Similarly, the team has connected with minority groups in the south of the country: Armenian communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Azeri communities in Kvemo Kartli.

**A 'home-grown' model.** UNICEF Georgia has not drawn on any international consultants or expertise to implement the Model. It has been designed and driven entirely by UNICEF's national staff and by Georgian stakeholders. UNICEF staff members – all of them – have become true influencers for child rights.

## Next steps

The next steps aim to ensure the full sustainability of the Georgia Model of Child Rights Promotion. For example, a process of strategic reflection is underway with the seven State universities on sustainable, non-UNICEF resourcing for their Child Rights Centres. The signs are promising, with the Director of Batumi University pledging the allocation of funding from the central university budget to ensure the continuation of its Centre.

UNICEF is currently working with the Inter-agency Commission on the Implementation of the CRC to ensure that the New Strategy and Action Plan for Human Rights emphasizes the needs of vulnerable children and spells out specific actions to support children.

The Georgian Model of Child Rights Promotion has implications for UNICEF more broadly. It demonstrates how the Convention on the Rights of the Child can be at the core of every aspect of UNICEF's work, with UNICEF itself modelling the change it wants to see across the whole of society.




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**UNICEF Georgia**

Tel: (995 32) 2 23 23 88, 2 25 11 30

E-mail: [tbilisi@unicef.org](mailto:tbilisi@unicef.org)

[unicef.org/georgia/](https://unicef.org/georgia/)

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