



Mekong
Children's
Forum
Human Trafficking
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Making History

People, Process and Participation

Mekong Children's Forum on Human Trafficking





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The ILO-IPEC Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women (TICW) is active in five countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, focusing its interventions on the prevention of labour and sexual exploitation of vulnerable groups.

The project works with Governments, Workers' and Employers' groups, and civil society at all levels to help bring about sustainable change.

Save the Children UK is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, the world's leading independent children's rights organization, with members in 29 countries and operational programmes in more than 100.

Save the Children works with children and their communities to provide practical assistance and, by influencing policy and public opinion, to bring about positive change for children.

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Foreword

In February 2004, the ILO, through its International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour's Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women joined forces with Save the Children UK's Community-based Initiatives Against Trafficking in Children in the Mekong Sub-region (the Cross-border Project) to advocate on behalf of children in the Greater Mekong Sub-region vulnerable to human trafficking and labour exploitation.

This joint-initiative, 'Voices of Children', culminated with a gathering of children in Bangkok from five countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region to speak out about child trafficking and suggest ways to tackle this most distressing exploitation which results in the worst forms of child labour.

The Mekong Children's Forum on Human Trafficking brought together children from villages and towns in Cambodia, China's Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces, Lao PDR, Northern Thailand and Viet Nam.

Many of their conclusions and recommendations were inspiring.

How many adults – even experts in the field of counter-trafficking – would have recommended a Mekong-wide closure of karaoke bars linked to sex services? How many would have called for an International Anti-Trafficking Day to highlight the fact that children, as a group, are most vulnerable to human traffickers? How many would have called for the authorities to forbid drug and alcohol abuse by border guards?

All of the young participants at the Mekong Children's Forum came from areas where the risk of trafficking is a day-to-day threat. Some had been trafficked before. They spoke from experience. As a group, they arrived at decisions and conclusions in a rational, unified and informative manner. Their collective voice was strong and authoritative.

One of the more simple yet thought-provoking series of messages was directed not to governments, but to families. "Families should pay close attention to taking care of their children," reads one recommendation. "We want adults to understand children," reads another.

At a news conference following the presentation of their recommendations to Government officials, the children were asked how closing karaoke bars was relevant to trafficking. Their answers were straightforward. "Children are trafficked into karaoke bars," said one. They must be closed "because they lead to families breaking up," said another. Family break-up is often cited as one cause of ill-prepared migration of youngsters, which can drive them into the hands of traffickers.

The Mekong Children's Recommendations on Human Trafficking resulted in a total of 43 recommendations and a call upon governments to get results. It was the first time Mekong children have joined together, across borders, face to face with their Government representatives on this issue. The officials were clearly impressed by the children and responded to their questions. They encouraged the children to continue to advocate for future consultation and participation once they returned home.

Children should be consulted more frequently on this and other matters that so directly threaten their lives and their futures. Too often children are marginalized in the debate about human trafficking. Too often they are relegated to "potential victim" status, worthy of our protection but not our consultation.

The Voices of Children initiative is not an attempt to simply amplify the volume of children's voices. It is the beginning of a process that, we hope, will build upon its own momentum. We have simply laid a foundation for further consultation.

The children said it themselves in two recommendations that read: "Adults should give children opportunities to participate in useful activities," and "Governments should take children's rights more seriously."

Both ILO Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child state that children have a right to be heard in any administrative proceedings affecting them. But in reality, how often does this happen?

As this publication went to press, Governments of the Greater Mekong Sub-region were in the process of coordinating their responses to the trafficking of human beings through the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (the COMMIT process). Children and other groups vulnerable to labour and sexual exploitation as a result of human trafficking have a right to play a part in these action plans. It is an opportunity that, in our view, should not be missed.

We at the International Labour Organization's Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women and Save the Children UK's Cross-border Project have pledged to the children who took part in all these forums to continue our joint-advocacy efforts to ensure their voices, and the voices of millions of other children, are heard in the arena of counter-trafficking.

However, this kind of advocacy is the job of everyone: Governments, workers' and employers' groups, parents and teachers. This Forum may be over, but others will follow. We must all do our part to ensure that children and young people everywhere are not just consulted about ways to fight human trafficking, but that their participation is officially recognized as part of the process.

Meanwhile we encourage everyone's participation to continue this dialogue through our Forum Web site: www.mekongchildrensforum.com.

We sincerely hope you find this publication and the experiences and lessons learned herein interesting and useful contributions to the fight against child trafficking and child labour.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Foreword	v
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
PART ONE: SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY	5
Ethical and practical aspects of organizing the Mekong Children's Forum	
Chapter 2: Creating an enabling environment	7
Chapter 3: Seeking informed consent	11
Chapter 4: Whose voice? Selecting participants	13
Chapter 5: Information for children	15
Chapter 6: Child protection: The duty of care	19
Chapter 7: Getting the message out: External communications	25
PART TWO: THE FORUMS	29
Proceedings of the Mekong Children's Forum, including summaries of the national forums	
Chapter 8: The national children's forums	31
Chapter 9: Proceedings of the Mekong Children's Forum	35
PART THREE: LOOKING FORWARD	43
Chapter 10: Follow-up	45
Chapter 11: Evaluation report	47
Chapter 12: Conclusions	55
ANNEXES	59
Annex I: Code of Conduct for Adults in the Mekong Children's Forum	61
Annex II: Children's Agendas for Action from national, provincial and other forums	63
Annex III: The Mekong Children's Recommendations on Human Trafficking	71
Annex IV: Bibliography of materials consulted in drafting the Preliminary Guidelines	75
Annex V: Brochure introducing the Voices of Children initiative	77
Annex VI: Children's information packs for the Mekong Children's Forum	81
Annex VII: Preliminary Guidelines for Organizing Human Trafficking – Voices of Children National Forums	103
Annex VIII: Responsibilities and Code of Conduct for Chaperones/Interpreters	145
Annex IX: Parents'/Guardians' informed consent form for the Mekong Children's Forum	147
Annex X: Information for seeking informed consent for children's participation in the Mekong Children's Forum	149
Annex XI: Evaluation forms for adults and children	151

Introduction

1

Stories told by the victims of human trafficking have helped bring about radical change in the way that governments and the public view the trade in human beings, especially children and women, in the Greater Mekong Sub-region.¹

Until quite recently, victims had often been treated as criminals and undesirables, or their plight simply ignored. Now, as people increasingly hear their side of the story, these attitudes are being replaced with sympathy, even outrage, at this exploitation; governments are working with development partners to prevent trafficking, to rescue and rehabilitate victims instead of punishing and deporting them; justice systems are starting to target the exploiters, and protect the exploited.

The stories of trafficked children have indeed inspired some action, but so far these children have had very little say in the type and form of action taken. That must change. All children have a right to have their views taken into account in decisions that directly affect them. And these children, with their invaluable perspectives, can help to design anti-trafficking policies and programmes that address the real issues in ways that work on the ground.

This need for child participation and consultation in the field of human trafficking led to the launch of the Voices of Children initiative in early 2004. Jointly sponsored by the International Labour Organization and Save the Children UK, Voices of Children advocates on behalf of vulnerable children to ensure their voices are heard, their views and recommendations considered and, ultimately, works to secure children a permanent place at the policymaking table in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS).

The first major activity under Voices of Children was a series of national and provincial children's forums in August and

September 2004. These penultimate events were the forerunners to the sub-regional Mekong Children's Forum on Human Trafficking held in Bangkok in October 2004. These national/provincial forums were organized in Cambodia, China (joint forum for Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces only), Lao PDR, Thailand (far northern provinces only) and Viet Nam.

The children who participated in these forums were given the opportunity to share their views and knowledge on human trafficking and discuss their suggestions with ministers and senior Government officials involved in the fight against trafficking. National media were also invited to present the children's recommendations and dialogue with officials to the public at large.

Five young delegates from each of these national forums² were selected by their peers to attend the sub-regional children's forum in Bangkok. A number of other previously trafficked children also attended the sub-regional gathering. Together they created a set of Recommendations to combat trafficking, reflecting the insights and aspirations of the hundreds of children in the sub-region who had taken part in the process directly and indirectly. The Recommendations were presented to ministers and senior officials from all five countries at the United Nations Conference Centre, during a special session of the Mekong Children's Forum.

The presentation to, and dialogue with, Government officials was carefully timed as many of the officials would soon be finalizing a multi-lateral, inter-ministerial, cross-border, Memorandum of Understanding among six GMS countries designed to coordinate their counter-trafficking efforts (the COMMIT process).

1

The Greater Mekong Sub-region comprises Cambodia, southern provinces of China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. However, due to ILO policy which limits cooperation projects with the government of Myanmar, that country has not been included in Voices of Children joint-initiative. Save the Children UK currently carries out some activities related to the initiative in Myanmar independently of ILO.

2

For the sake of brevity, the five national and provincial forums are referred to as "national" children's forums in the rest of this report; however, the forums in China and Thailand only included children from limited areas.

Together with the national forums, the Mekong Children's Forum was designed to give children both an advocacy platform as well as to demonstrate how children can participate in policymaking, and to influence attitudes among policymakers and the public about the added value of including children in the decision-making process – at all levels. The children's statements and suggestions (referred to as Agendas for Action at the national level but Recommendations at the sub-regional level) would also be key reference documents for Save the Children UK and ILO when reviewing and refining their own counter-trafficking interventions.

Most of the children who took part in the forums live in areas where ill-prepared, informal labour migration is common among young people – and with it the increased risk of falling prey to human traffickers; a substantial number had personal experience of being trafficked. Nearly all were involved in voluntary anti-trafficking work in their own communities. They were unquestionably children with something to say.

1.1. Partnership for children

The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) and Save the Children UK are frontline agencies in the fight against trafficking in persons, with country teams in Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam.

'Voices of Children' specifically engages two sub-regional projects: ILO's Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women (TICW) and Save the Children UK's Cross-Border Project. Both projects are funded by the UK's Department for International Development. In 2003, they signed a Partnership Agreement that covers five areas of collaboration: (a) the understanding of trafficking and its responses; (b) advocacy for policy change; (c) better-informed interventions and synergy; (d) practical working arrangements at grassroots; and (e) structures, networks and management procedures.

The partnership highlights the individual strengths of the two organizations and the ways they can complement each other's work. TICW has strong working relations with governmental institutions, expertise in labour and

migration issues and participatory approaches, advocacy, and the ability to activate a cascade of national, provincial and district bodies. Save the Children UK brings to the partnership its tested interventions at the grassroots level, partnerships in local communities, and strong expertise in child participation approaches. Working together, the two organizations are in a stronger position to ensure that national policy and programmes on trafficking account for, and include in a participatory manner, the views and perspectives of children.

Beyond this core partnership, the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums also called on the collaboration of various partner organizations, especially in the national forums. These partners ranged from government agencies to international organizations to grassroots NGOs, which brought not just expertise and experience but the capacity to involve a much larger number of children from diverse areas and backgrounds. These partners undoubtedly enriched the process; at the same time, it was a learning process for all concerned.

1.2. The COMMIT process

The Mekong Children's Forum was timed to influence the Coordinated Mekong Inter-Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking, or COMMIT process. Under COMMIT, a major inter-Ministerial, sub-regional policy-making initiative, the six governments in the GMS agreed in October 2004 on a framework for cross-border cooperation and collaboration in anti-trafficking work. The next stage was the development of a sub-regional Plan of Action based on this framework. The UN Inter-agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region all UN-IAP acts as the COMMIT secretariat.

Many of the ministers and senior officials the children met during the national and sub-regional forums were directly involved in COMMIT. Following the Mekong Children's Forum, two key COMMIT meetings took place in Yangon, Myanmar, in late October 2004: the senior officials met first to finalize the text of the sub-regional MoU, the COMMIT Declaration. Government ministers then joined the process to deliberate and sign the Declaration, committing them to the development of a coordinated Sub-regional Plan of Action to Combat Human Trafficking.

Both of these meetings took place in Yangon, Myanmar. While ILO policy on cooperation with Myanmar³ made it impractical to hold the Mekong Children's Forum in Yangon, it was hoped that the ministers and senior officials who came to the national and sub-regional children's forums would carry the children's messages, in the form of their Recommendations and Agendas for Action, to the COMMIT meetings, and would be advocates for a more general commitment to involve children in policymaking and action on trafficking.⁴

1.3. The sub-regional team

For the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums, responsibility was shared between the national and sub-regional offices (regional, in the case of Save the Children UK) of the two organizations. While the initiative was conceived at sub-regional level, the country office of either Save the Children UK or ILO took the lead in designing and organizing the national forums. The role of the sub-regional offices was to support the national organizers. An important part of this role was the provision of technical support on how to implement the forums in an ethical and participatory way, achieving effective advocacy while providing adequate protection for the especially vulnerable children who would take part.

A sub-regional Organizing Committee was created to oversee the Mekong Children's Forum process, mobilize resources, and represent the initiative with relevant institutions and individuals. This team comprised the Chief Technical Adviser of the ILO Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women, the Regional Coordinator of the Save the Children UK Southeast and East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (SEAPRO), the Project Coordinator of the Save the Children UK Cross-border Project, and the Communications Officers of ILO-IPEC and Save the Children UK Cross-border Project.

Two consultants were engaged especially for the project. An Internal Communications Consultant prepared policies and guidelines for adult organizers and facilitators, prepared information materials for child participants in the sub-regional forum, and documented the process. Another consultant was hired as Forum Coordinator for the

Mekong Children's Forum, responsible for the overall administrative and logistical requirements, including identifying the venue and facilities, arranging translation and other support services, and making sure that the other needs of the children and adult guests at the forum were appropriately met.

1.4. This report

This report focuses on the sub-regional Mekong Children's Forum (MCF) and the processes that led to it.

- Part I describes the ethical and practical framework that was developed to support children's advocacy in the MCF and the processes that led up to it, as well as some of the concerns and unexpected events that emerged during implementation;
- Part II focuses on the proceedings of the MCF, with summaries of the national children's forums;
- Part III includes an evaluation report and gives conclusions and recommendations for future forums. Learning points from the process and suggestions for the future come from the observations of the documenter and others involved in the process, along with the outcomes of a slightly more formal evaluation in the weeks after the forum that included children, national partners, organizers, facilitators and chaperones among the respondents. Learning points and suggestions related to particular topics are included at the end of the relevant chapters, and are brought together in Chapter 12.

The many annexes to this report include nearly all of the relevant documents, including the policies and guidelines and the information for children, produced at the sub-regional level to support the national and sub-regional forums. It is hoped that others who plan to organize similar participatory initiatives with children will find them useful resources.

³

ILO's Governing Body has instructed the International Labour Office to limit involvement with the Government of Myanmar to the offering of technical assistance, if requested, to bring an end to forced labour, as it is obliged to do under the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29).

⁴

When told of this intention, officers of UNIAP pointed out that drafting of the Declaration was too advanced at this point to insert new content but were optimistic that children could influence drafting of the Plan of Action by concerted efforts at national level.

PART ONE

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY Ethical and practical aspects of organizing the Mekong Children's Forum

Chapter 2: Creating an enabling environment

Chapter 3: Seeking informed consent

Chapter 4: Whose voice? Selecting participants

Chapter 5: Information for children

Chapter 6: Child protection: The duty of care

Chapter 7: Getting the message out:

External communications



Creating an enabling environment

2

The Mekong Children's Forum and national forums were intended as opportunities for children to discuss their experiences and views among themselves and to draft and deliver their own advocacy messages. The role of adults was to create an enabling environment for children to do this. For the initiative, enabling environment was defined as "an environment in which all children can exercise their rights to speak freely and exchange ideas in safety and comfort, with all relevant information and necessary support, confident of being treated with respect, leading to only positive impacts on their lives."⁵

A starting point for thinking about how to do this was the principles for creating an enabling environment developed by Henk van Beers of Save the Children Sweden:⁶

Voluntary involvement Children's involvement in any initiative should be voluntary. They should also have the right to change their mind about their participation during the process.

Non-discrimination Children's representation should relate to the specific issues in question and an inclusive approach should be adopted.

Provision of and access to information Children need to be sufficiently informed about the purpose, process, expected outcome and implications of their involvement. They should have opportunities to gather and analyse information themselves.

Confidentiality and privacy Children's identity and the information they provide should be kept confidential. Communicating children's information to a wider audience should only be done with their agreement and should not put them at risk.

Avoid putting children at risk Children's involvement may interfere with their education or work. Those who aid children's involvement have to be aware that

children may put themselves at risk by expressing their views or discussing sensitive issues in a group.

Flagging up children's contributions Throughout the process of children's involvement, children's views should be given equal respect to those of adults and taken into full consideration.

Provide feedback and follow-up Children should be informed about the outcome of decisions and be provided with an opportunity to react. Efforts should be aimed at making children's participation an integrated part of all activities, decisions and policies that affect children.

As one of the initiative's objectives was to demonstrate "the value of participatory approaches in the search for long-term sustainable solutions to the problem of trafficking," it was especially important for the Mekong Children's Forum to provide good examples of children's participation, and to open all of the processes to scrutiny, criticism and learning.

2.1. Starting point

The first question that had to be asked was whether the forums would actually be in the children's best interests; could the forum's objectives be achieved without the inherent risks of taking vulnerable children away from their parents (and perhaps from study or work)? It was clear that the forums were the most efficient way for widely dispersed children from developing communities to share their ideas and jointly plan advocacy and action. The representative nature of a forum also provided an environment that would benefit not just the participants but a much larger number of children vulnerable to trafficking. On the other hand, collecting and documenting experiences of vulnerable and trafficked children, could be done far better through participatory research at the community level. This led to the special emphasis on

⁵ Preliminary Guidelines section B3 (see Annex VII).

⁶ From Henk van Beers, *CRIN newsletter* 16, p. 30.

sharing ideas rather than gathering experiences, especially for the sub-regional forum.

2.2. Policies and guidelines

The Mekong Children's Forum and national forums, particularly the involvement of highly vulnerable children, set some special ethical and practical challenges. The Organizing Committee were keen to develop an ethical and practical framework that could inform the entire process, from local up to sub-regional levels.

A set of *Preliminary Guidelines for Organizing Human Trafficking – Voices of Children National Forums*⁷ was developed and distributed to national forum organizers at the end of July 2004. The Preliminary Guidelines were based on recent thinking on children's participation, particularly in Asia.⁸ They set out the main ethical concerns and gave practical guidance on how to protect the rights of the participating children while achieving the objectives of the initiative as a whole. They were intended to be both an aid to planning and a reference source when ethical decisions had to be made during the forums.

The structure of the *Preliminary Guidelines* is given below. National forum organizers were recommended to share at least Parts A, B, C and E with partners and others involved with the national forums. Additional written guidance was developed and distributed in response to comments and requests.

Part A: Background Information on the initiative, to create a common understanding among staff in the various countries, which could also be shared with partners (Part A).

Parts B and C: Principles and Practice Standards, setting out major ethical concerns and practice standards relating to children's involvement in the forums. Ethical and practical issues related to child protection in the forums and related processes were considered important enough to have their own section, **Guidelines on Child Protection** (Part C).

Part D: Planning the National Children's Forums, consisting of advice for organizers on how to plan and prepare for the forums and implement the standards and guidelines in Parts B and C. This section also set out some required preparation for the sub-regional forum, including

transparent selection of children's representatives and preparing messages and presentations for children to take to the sub-regional forum, both of which were to be done by the children during the national forums, if possible (Part D).

Part E: Media and Publicity Guidelines covered the important issue of media coverage and how to manage the children's contact with the media in an ethical way (Part E).

Part F: Steps for Approaching Children and Parents included information and issues that should be discussed with children and parents, including obtaining their informed consent and responsibility for children's safety and well-being during travel related to the forums (Part F).

Annexes included a sample informed consent form to be signed by parents/legal guardians and chaperones (adults accompanying and responsible for the children); a model letter to the chaperones informing them of their role and responsibilities; and a children's introduction to the initiative. Naturally, all of these forms and guidelines were to be translated into local languages.

The following chapters describe the policies and guidelines that were developed for various aspects of forum organization. Comments on how these were implemented are given in the Learning and Recommendations at the end of each chapter.

2.3. Learning and recommendations

It became clear that detailed written guidelines, even backed up by the availability of verbal guidance by email or telephone, were not always enough to ensure that all staff and partners involved in organizing the forums were maintaining the desired ethical and practical standards. Some organizers of national forums complained that the Preliminary Guidelines were too long for them to read in the short time they had before their forums, or to translate and distribute to their partners.

The ethical and practical framework set out in the *Preliminary Guidelines* was approved by respondents in the evaluation, with a few exceptions on specific points that will be covered later. However, the presentation seems to have caused problems. Also, with written guidelines, there

7

An amended version of these *Guidelines* is included in Annex VII.

8

In style and content, the practical elements of the *Preliminary Guidelines* borrowed heavily from *So You Want to Consult with Children? A toolkit of good practice*, developed by Sarah Stevenson for the Save the Children Child Participation Working Group in 2003. For a bibliography of sources consulted in drafting the *Preliminary Guidelines*, see Annex V.

is no guarantee that they will be understood or implemented uniformly by readers in different countries.

What we learned:

- The *Preliminary Guidelines* should be reviewed and presented in a simpler, more user-friendly format.
- Written guidelines are not enough; national-level organizers and interested partners should be given training on facilitating children's participation and on how to implement the guidelines.
- Among other things, the training should cover how to ensure that all participants feel confident to participate equally, whatever their background, age or educational level, especially in dialogues with adults.

Seeking informed consent

3

It was a minimum requirement that children and their parents or legal guardians must give their informed consent before the child could participate in the Mekong Children's Forum or national forums. More generally, it was a principle throughout the initiative that children should never be asked to make decisions without knowing the relevant facts and implications of their decisions.

Informed consent for participation was explained as meaning that children and their parents/guardians "must understand exactly what Voices of Children is, what activities (including travel) it will involve, what publicity it is likely to attract, what risks might be involved, and how the participating children will be supported and protected" (*Preliminary Guidelines* section D:3.2). "They must also know that consent can be freely withdrawn at any time" (*Preliminary Guidelines* section B:3.3).

To help national forum organizers seek informed consent (and to answer enquiries about the forums), a short introduction to the Voices of Children initiative was included as an annex to the *Preliminary Guidelines*. The organizers were expected to supplement this with more detailed information about the national forum. When they sought informed consent, an organizer or a partner, or someone else knowledgeable about the forum, should be available to answer children's and parents' or guardians' questions.

National teams were also responsible for seeking informed consent for participation in the sub-regional forum. By this point, the children and their parents/guardians would already have a good understanding of what it meant to participate in the forums.

3.1. Consent form

The *Preliminary Guidelines* included a model informed consent form, based on the form used for participation in the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children.⁹ This

was a written agreement between the adult accompanying the child and the parents or guardians. The parents or guardians (nominally) give the chaperone the responsibility for the child's well-being during the forum and related travel, and can specify what kind of contact their child can have with journalists; the chaperone accepts the responsibilities they are assigned in the form.

For the national forums, it was suggested that organizers design their own form or other appropriate informed consent procedure, perhaps using the model form but, in any event, certainly seeking consent for similar things. A slightly amended version of the form was distributed later on for national organizers to seek consent for children's participation in the sub-regional forum. In addition, a supplementary information note about the sub-regional forum, including the arrangements for media contact with children was prepared for the national teams to help them seek informed consent. This supplementary note is included as Annex X of this report.

Steps for approaching children and their parents to obtain consent were given in Part F of the *Preliminary Guidelines*. These recommended that children's consent should be sought before asking for the consent of parents or guardians. It also directed that children, parents/guardians and the chaperone should meet in person before signing the consent form. The adult in charge of seeking consent should ensure that the parents/guardians understand each part of the consent form before signing.

3.2. Learning and recommendations

Several national organizers complained that the 'model' informed consent form was too complicated and possibly intimidating for parents and guardians, especially of the more vulnerable children. There was some question over the legal status of the consent form in different countries and what commitments ILO and Save the Children UK could make as organizations. The issues remained unresolved.

9

Included in *So You Want to Consult with Children*, p. 72.

While consent forms were completed for all of the children participating in the sub-regional forum, there was very little way of knowing how well the parents or guardians had understood them.

Because chaperones were responsible for two or more children who might live a great distance away, it was not always possible to arrange a meeting with children and parents/guardians before signing the consent forms.

What we learned:

- The procedures for obtaining parents'/guardians' consent should be reviewed to ensure they are appropriate and practical in the national context.
- The informed consent form should be revised and simplified and any legal issues should be resolved early on in the process at the organizational level.
- Training for national-level organizers and partners should include how to seek informed consent from children and parents/guardians.

Whose voice? Selecting participants

4

Which children are most qualified to talk about human trafficking? Whose voices will have genuine weight? These were crucial questions in deciding how children should be selected to participate in the forums.

It was important that children with direct experience of trafficking and migration should be given a choice to voice their ideas, not just their experiences. Other children living in vulnerable families and communities should also be well represented, as they would be directly affected by anti-trafficking initiatives.

After some discussion, it was decided that children already involved in anti-trafficking work but not necessarily at risk themselves should be included because of their interest in, and knowledge of, the response to human trafficking; however, they should make up less than half of the total number of children participating in national forums.

The national forums

To give more children a chance to participate in the national forums, Save the Children and ILO invited in-country partners to send children. It was suggested that these partners be encouraged to inform as many children as possible about the forums and encourage them to discuss migration and trafficking before picking their representatives to take part in the national forums. In this way, the children in the national and sub-regional forums could bring with them a broad range of experiences and ideas from their peers.

Partner organizations were responsible for nominating participants for the national forums. ILO and Save the Children encouraged them to use a fair and transparent selection process, directly involving the children themselves as far as possible. The *Preliminary Guidelines* also gave country forum organizing teams the following guidelines for selection of children:

- A mix of ages between 10 and 17 years;
- Gender mix;
- Some children with experience of trafficking;
- Some working children;
- Some out-of-school children;
- Some children with little or no experience of participating in such forums;
- A mix of children from different areas/provinces.

As far as possible, the group of participants should reflect the patterns of vulnerability to trafficking in the country (or the participating provinces, in the case of Thailand and China). For example, if a high proportion of trafficked children were girls from a particular ethnic minority, a significant number of girls from that minority should be invited to participate.

The Mekong Children's Forum

For the sub-regional Mekong Children's Forum, it was decided that children participating in the national forums should be able to choose their own delegates, who would take their messages and represent their interests in the sub-regional forum. In each national forum, the participants were given the chance to select five delegates. In all but one case this was achieved by democratic election during the event itself¹⁰, and any criteria (such as gender mix, representation of particular provinces) were discussed with the children beforehand.

10

In Lao PDR, the national forum was held in late September allowing insufficient time for the arrangement of travel documents for the main event in Bangkok. Prior to the national forum, a committee of national forum organizers selected the five children who would attend the MCF. The national organizers said the process for selection of the children was fair and transparent.

4.1. Learning and recommendations

Feedback from the evaluation indicated that many adults felt not enough former victims of trafficking participated in the Mekong Children's Forum, and that this made the children's advocacy less credible; although the policy of involving children who might not be vulnerable but who have experience of anti-trafficking work also had its defenders.

Children in the national forums chose the most confident and articulate children who fit their criteria as delegates to the Mekong Children's Forum. Vulnerable children and victims of trafficking tend to have a lower level of education and sometimes have lower levels of self esteem. This could explain why relatively few of the child delegates in the Mekong Children's Forum were from these groups.

Many former victims of trafficking do not return to their homes until they are over 18. They may have valuable experience but are excluded by the current guidelines, which say only under-18s can take part.

What we learned:

- The principle that children should be able to choose their own representatives is important, and should be retained for future events. But it should also be more actively applied in selecting participants for national forums.
- Ways should be found to include more victims of trafficking in sub-regional and national forums and in any preparatory processes. These could include working with organizations in destination countries that have contact with trafficking victims, and organizing separate forums for victims at organizational/ local level.
- Organizers could consider relaxing the age restriction and allow over-18s to participate. Alternatively, more effort could be made to find meaningful roles for over 18s in preparing for and organizing the forums, as was suggested in the *Preliminary Guidelines*.

Information for children

5

While the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums were primarily about children's perspectives, it was important that participants coming from different backgrounds and countries share at least a minimum understanding of human trafficking as a development issue and of the various policies and programme responses to it. Save the Children UK and ILO gave high priority to making sure that children had access to sufficient up-to-date information, to help them make decisions and to find realistic solutions. Transparency with children was another important principle of the initiative.

The organizers passed on information to children mainly through printed information before and after the forums, and through verbal presentations or group work during the forums. A great deal of care was taken in trying to provide information without pushing children to think one way or another. As far as possible, children were given only "neutral" background information rather than pre-formed opinions, and encouraged to reach their own conclusions. When the organizers did make suggestions or offer opinions, it was emphasized that children did not have to agree with them.

Children also needed a chance to seek their own information – to prepare for their participation before coming to the forums, thinking about the issues themselves and discussing them with their friends.

It was decided that children should receive information in their own language and on a range of topics (see sections B.5 and D.2 of the *Preliminary Guidelines*). Most background information should be given to the children preferably several weeks before the forums. This gives them time to read it, consider it, ask questions, do their own research, and discuss the information with their friends. Partner organizations in contact with the children should be encouraged to support the children in reading and sharing the information, answering children's questions, and providing any necessary support to children with reading or language difficulties.

5.1. The national forums

For the national forums, organizers were responsible for providing and disseminating information to children in the most appropriate manner. The *Preliminary Guidelines* included a two-page children's introduction to the initiative and a suggested list of topics that children and their parents/guardians should receive information about (section D.5). They also gave the following guidance about how to prepare this information:

1. acknowledge children's limited experience and developing skills;
2. avoid technical jargon;
3. do not require children to have specific technical knowledge of organizations, laws, conventions, technical concepts etc.; if these need to be mentioned, they should be explained;
4. be interesting, engaging and attractive for children with limited literacy and education;
5. try to look at trafficking and the related issues from the perspective of these children.

5.2. The Mekong Children's Forum

By the time of the sub-regional forum, children would already have had a chance to learn about and discuss trafficking in the national forums. To supplement this knowledge, and to ensure that children from different countries had common understandings on some key concepts, a series of printed information packs was prepared for children and translated into national languages.

The first information pack, which children received in the weeks preceding the sub-regional forum, contained a mix of background information and introductions to the initiative and the organizers:

Contents of First Info Pack to Children:

1. A welcome note (including introduction of the individual members of the sub-regional team);
2. An introduction to the Voices of Children initiative;
3. An introduction to ILO and Save the Children UK;
4. An introduction to the COMMIT process;
5. An introduction to Advocacy and the Media;
6. An introduction to Trafficking and Migration;
7. An overview of strategies currently used to end trafficking and assist trafficking victims;
8. How trafficking violates children's rights;
9. A child-friendly version of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (prepared by UNICEF);
10. Four "Trafficking Stories" showing different aspects of trafficking in children, based on elements from true stories recounted by children during participatory research exercises. These stories were intended to clarify the concept of trafficking and bridge the gap between technical descriptions of trafficking and children's real lives, particularly for children with no direct experience.

At the start of the sub-regional forum, children were given a second information pack.

Contents of the Second Info Pack to Children:

1. A welcome note;
2. The forum agenda;
3. The "Agendas for Action" that children had prepared in all five of the national forums, along with messages from a children's forum organized by Save the Children UK in Myanmar and from a small workshop at the Ban Kredtakarn Home for Girls in Nonthaburi Province, Thailand, under the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, organized with the assistance of ILO;
4. An introduction to the functions of various adults that children would meet during the forum (facilitators, chaperones, organizers, journalists, ministers and senior officials), along with a Code of Conduct for adults coming to the forums (see Annex I);
5. A note on some things children might be asked to do, such as helping with documentation and evaluation;
6. A copy of the first information pack;
7. One more follow-up information pack was planned, which would have included information about the COMMIT Ministerial Meeting; a copy of the COMMIT Declaration; information about follow-up action by Save the Children UK, ILO, children and others; and an overview of the media coverage the forums attracted. Full texts of these information packs are given in Annex VI.

Although the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums included children from age 10 up to age 17, only one version of the information packs was prepared for all children. The style was deliberately simple and straight forward, and aimed toward readers. This strategy seems to have worked, allowing younger participants to understand without alienating older participants.

Many practitioners recommend "field-testing" information for children – that is, giving it to children representative of the target audience in order to gauge their reactions and understanding before finalizing it. Because of the limited time and resources available to organize the forums, this was not feasible. The organizers hoped that if children had questions about the information, they would have opportunities to discuss them with their peers, with the staff of the partner organizations who work with them, or bring their questions to the forums.

5.3. Forum language

Some of the groups vulnerable to trafficking in Asia find themselves excluded from the mainstream in part because they do not speak the national language well. Cross-border migrants and children trafficked across borders sometimes find themselves unable to communicate their needs and ideas. It was essential that, as far as possible, children should not be excluded from participation because of languages they speak or do not speak. In such cases, national forum organizers were asked to provide a special interpreter rather than exclude the children.

In the sub-regional forum, with so many languages represented, English was chosen as the working language. Since none of the children could be expected to speak or understand English adequately, each country team had at least one interpreter to provide simultaneous translation. This allowed a high level of communication between children during the forum. However, it also evidently slowed the process.

5.4. Feedback and follow-up

One of the most common complaints that children make about meetings and similar events in which they have participated is a lack of follow-up. They enjoy a great deal of attention before the event and while it is going on, but afterwards the children often hear nothing more; they do not know what was done with their contribution, or what changes they helped to bring about.

The Organizing Committee were keen to avoid making this mistake. Children should hear what happened next and know that Save the Children UK, ILO and the local agencies

with which the children are in direct contact, are willing to work with them to implement their suggestions from the forums.

The Preliminary Guidelines said that country offices should encourage local partner organizations to encourage and support participating children to tell their peers what they had done and what they had learned at the forums.

Children should also hear about what had happened as a result of their participation in the forums – about media coverage, about how their Agendas for Action and recommendations had been received and about what action had been taken as a result.

The children's suggestions and insights in the forums should be used as a basis for reviewing programme work, not only among Save the Children UK and ILO offices, but among partners too. They should consider supporting any actions that children wished to initiate.

The Mekong Children's Forum and national forums would present many opportunities for empowerment and for changing attitudes among diverse groups of children and adults. Non-participating children, parents, teachers and other decision-makers were bound to learn about the forums through word-of-mouth or through the media. Country offices were encouraged to build on any interest in children's participation and anti-trafficking work that this stimulated by providing additional information and encouraging discussions.

Once again, the *Preliminary Guidelines* left it up to the national forum organizers to decide how they could do all of these things. The feedback and follow-up measures for the sub-regional forum are described in section 8.11.

5.5. Learning and recommendations

Receiving information in advance of the forums undoubtedly helped to enrich the children's discussions. Where national-level organizers and partners supported local-level or organizational-level meetings and similar preparatory processes that allowed children to think through issues themselves, discuss them with their peers, and seek clarification from adults, it meant children came to national forums more prepared and able to speak for a wider group of their peers.

Some adult presentations in the Mekong Children's Forum seemed unplanned and, as a result, were confusing and even self-contradictory. Talking to children in a way that they can understand is not always easy, especially when it is about "adult" topics like trafficking or the mechanics of a meeting.

A transparent and non-prescriptive approach to providing information seems to have helped to establish children's trust and make them feel more able to voice their own opinions. However, it is not always easy to maintain transparency with children. For example, the inability of the children from Myanmar to be present at the Mekong Children's Forum was not fully explained to children.

The information packs for children seem to have been read and understood by the majority of child participants, even those as young as age 10. However, some children thought there was too much information or that some content was not interesting enough. This was particularly true of children who received the information packs late and did not have any opportunity to discuss them with adults or their friends.

What we learned:

- Adult presentations, even very brief, during children's forums should be planned, clear and brief, and if possible adults should receive some training or support in how to present in a participatory, child-friendly way;
- Printed information supplied to children should be complemented by local-level or organizational-level meetings and learning activities to help children understand the key messages;
- Children's information needs – content and format/medium – should be reviewed, especially for younger children. Special attention should be paid to ensuring all children receive sufficient briefings.

Child protection: The duty of care

6

Bringing children to the forums evidently involved taking them away from their parents and guardians for several days and bringing them into contact with many strangers, both adults and children.

Journalists would certainly want to interview and photograph participants, creating potential risks if incorrect, private or damaging information about them were to be disseminated to wide audiences. Many of the children participating in the forums were invited precisely because they were from particularly vulnerable groups. For these reasons, the organizers placed extra emphasis on child protection throughout the forums.

The core elements of the child protection strategy for the Mekong Children's Forum were as follows:

1. At least one responsible adult should know the whereabouts of each child at all times;
2. Every child must be covered by travel, medical, personal accident and liability insurance while participating in, and traveling to and from, the forums;
3. All steps should be taken to ensure that every child receives appropriate assistance in the event of medical or other emergencies;
4. The organizers must make every effort to ensure that children were not at risk while under their responsibility, including by the presence of anyone invited to the forums;
5. The principle of transparency with the children meant that children should be told about these precautions. In some cases the precautions may seem over-restrictive, and the organizers were keen that the children should understand them and have a chance to comment on them. Children learned about the precautions verbally and in some printed documents.

Adults in the forums

Particular attention was paid to ensuring adults in the forum did not abuse their positions of physical and social power over children. Various rules of conduct were included in the *Preliminary Guidelines* to be passed on to adults coming into contact with the child participants.

For the sub-regional forum, these were summarized into a Code of Conduct for Adults that was distributed to adult visitors (see Annex I). The code of conduct included forbidding physical violence against children, sexual relations between adults and children, and adults making sexual suggestions or using sexual language to children. Children received a copy of this Code of Conduct so that they could see what was considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour by adults.

Forum organizers and/or partner organizations supporting the children's involvement were expected to carry out a background check of any adults given positions of responsibility over the children (facilitators, chaperones, interpreters etc.) who were not already well known. As police databases on convictions for crimes against children are unreliable or nonexistent in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, the background would necessarily be informal – mainly checking references and talking to others who had worked with the adult before (see *Preliminary Guidelines*, section C.5).

Chaperones

Every child participating in a forum was assigned an adult chaperone who would be responsible for helping the child and taking care of their best interests throughout the forum as well as during any related travel. Because the chaperone would need to pay close attention to the children under their responsibility, it was decided that each chaperone should be responsible for no more than four or five children. Preferably, each child would be assigned a chaperone of the same sex.¹¹

11

The chaperones' roles and responsibilities were largely based on those given for "accompanying adults" in *So You Want to Consult with Children* (particularly p.70).

Country staff had the responsibility to select chaperones for both the national and the sub-regional forums. Section C.6 of the Preliminary Guidelines included the responsibilities and standards of behaviour expected of the chaperones, along with guidance on how they should be selected. The chaperone must speak the same language as the child, and should preferably be someone who knew the child and with whom the child had a trusting relationship. The chaperone, the child and the child's parents or guardians should have a chance to get to know each other before the forum so they could decide whether they were comfortable with the roles.

For the sub-regional forum, it was decided that chaperones should double as interpreters to reduce the number of adults needed in the sessions. There should be two chaperone-interpreters per country. (This was not always followed, and in some countries, there was one chaperone and one interpreter for a five-member team.).

6.1. Contingency planning

To ensure appropriate and timely responses to problems encountered by children, it was suggested that forum organizers should make plans for the following contingencies:

- A child experiences emotional or psychological difficulties during (or as a result of) the forum;
- A conflict develops among the children or adults participating;
- There is a complaint about inappropriate behaviour by an adult or another child towards a child or adult;
- A child goes missing;
- There is a fire at the hotel or forum venue;
- A child or adult reports that some property has been stolen;
- A child or adult has a medical problem.

In the sub-regional forum, a nurse was hired to be present throughout the forum, and a local hospital was notified that the forum was taking place. As the forum venue was attached to an emergency home for women and children, psychosocial support was available. One facilitator was made child protection officer, and was responsible for deciding how problems should be dealt with. In one difficult case, an ad hoc panel was convened.

6.2. Responding to children's problems and complaints

It was important that children should be confident in knowing that a problem or complaint made against other children or adults would be listened to and taken seriously

and the complaint would be dealt with discretely and in a way that protected the child's best interests.

The *Preliminary Guidelines* (Section C.9) suggested that:

- The organizers should select one or two focal points for dealing with complaints. Any adult who receives a complaint should quickly communicate it directly to one of these focal points (unless the child has specifically asked the adult not to); the adult receiving the complaint should never try to address a sensitive problem independently;
- Any action to be taken should be discussed first with the child and any other party directly involved. The child's best interests should always be the first priority in responding to any problem. In some cases, it may be necessary to breach confidentiality or act against the child's will in order to protect the child's best interests, but this should always be given very careful consideration;
- The identity of the child making a complaint should not be shared except with the focal points, unless it is absolutely necessary or the child wishes it;
- If it is necessary to communicate with the child again about the complaint, it should be done in a way that draws as little attention as possible;
- Anonymous and confidential reporting systems should be established, such as a confidential letterbox.

6.3. Emergency cards

The *Preliminary Guidelines* recommended that children should be given an emergency card containing important telephone numbers (including a number at which the organizers could be contacted) and the address of the forum venue. This would help them if they became lost. These cards were issued to the children in the sub-regional Mekong Children's Forum.

6.4. Balancing privacy and advocacy – children and media

How to manage children's contact with journalists was probably the most difficult issue for the Mekong Children's Forum organizers. On the one hand, substantial media coverage was crucial to successful advocacy. The ILO Communications Officer, who had many years' experience as a journalist, advised that journalists would be more likely to cover the story, and in a more compelling way, if they could have photographs or video and interviews of children about their personal experiences of trafficking and migration. On the other hand, the organizers had a duty to protect children from the possible negative consequences

of media coverage: invasion of privacy; stigmatization and discrimination; legal difficulties; having their words and stories possibly misrepresented; and even the danger of being further exploited or harmed by traffickers.

Linked to this was the question of how to present the participants. If readers or viewers saw that real victims of trafficking were taking part in the forums, they would be more likely to pay attention. However, this would also mean that any children who were identified, or identifiable, through the media coverage might be automatically assumed to be victims of trafficking. A fundamental principle in Save the Children's Child Protection Policy is that children should never be identified as victims of abuse. The Organizing Committee also felt that it was important to emphasize the participants' role as active advocates with their own ideas, regardless of background, rather than victims needing adult help.

Another question related to Article 12 of the CRC:

"[...] the right to express [...] views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

Could all the children, or some of the children, fully comprehend the long-term risks involved in media coverage? How far should decisions about contact with the media be left up to them?

Finally, it was decided that the organizers would not treat children differently on the basis of whether or not they had experiences of trafficking or exploitation. All children had an equal right to speak to the media, and to protection.

One possibility considered was to brief journalists and give them guidelines about use of children's names, personal information and photographs/video. While journalists were expected to be sympathetic, it was decided that the risk of them publishing sensitive information was too high (which had been illustrated by recent cases in the region). Therefore the children and the organizers would need to limit access to certain data (including photographs) and only pre-selected interviewees.

Informed consent for media contact

It was decided that both children and their parents/guardians would be asked what level of media contact they would be comfortable with. This would put the decision in the hands of people who knew more than the organizers about the child's situation and vulnerability. A section was

added to the parents'/guardians' informed consent form (see Annex IX), offering the choices of:

- No media contact at all (the child is out of the room when journalists are present and may not be photographed);
- Limited media contact (the child may be in the room when journalists are present and may be photographed, but may not be interviewed individually);
- Full media contact (the child and chaperone have full responsibility to decide on the appropriate level of media contact, which might include photographs and individual interviews).

The "information for seeking informed consent" (see Annex X) explained the media arrangements, and the reasons for them, to the parents and guardians.

At the forums themselves, children would be informed about the potential benefits and risk of media contact, and asked to decide whether they would like to be interviewed and what other contact they wanted with the media (within the limits that their parents/guardians had already specified). At the sub-regional forum, a short interactive presentation was given about the pros and cons of contact with the media. After that, the chaperones were asked to informally discuss media contact with children from their country¹² and see which children were willing to meet journalists face to face. Because children in Southeast Asia are often not confident in saying 'no' to adults, it was important that children had to actively volunteer to meet the media directly.

Support for interviews

It was further decided that any child who volunteered to be interviewed would be given some briefing about what to expect – especially since many of the journalists would probably want to ask about their experiences of trafficking and other personal information – and how to handle unwelcome questions.

All children would be accompanied by their chaperone and an organizer during contact with the media. The adults could intervene if the child became uncomfortable or the interviewer asked questions that the child did not want to answer (these could be agreed beforehand with the chaperone and organizer). However, the adults should not interrupt, censor or "correct" the child.

12

Parents and guardians had consented to media contact, including photographs, in all but Lao PDR.

Protecting confidential information

The organizers should share personal information about participating children only when it was clearly necessary and in the child's best interests. This included name, address, village and district. Access to records about the participating children should be strictly limited.

Giving children control over information

Another principle that was reinforced during the sub-regional forum was that children should have complete control over their own personal information, including their own experiences. One implication of this was that former victims of trafficking or exploitation would not be provided to journalists on request – journalists could interview only children who volunteered to be interviewed and would be given no prior information about their experiences. The other main implication of this was that children should be able to talk about their thoughts and own experiences in their own way – adults would not correct or supplement what the children said.

Children's outputs

Organizers were told that they should tell children before any art or writing exercise how their outputs might be used – for example, exhibited publicly, given to journalists, or published in forum reports. In this way, children could decide what they wished to communicate and how. In the case of artwork, which is easy to misinterpret, children's own interpretation should be noted down and always distributed with copies of the artwork, along with information about consent the child has given for how the artwork can be used.

Photographs and video

Children can easily be recognized in photographic and video images, so the Organizing Committee wanted to strictly limit camera access to the forums and surrounding events. Clearly, children speaking to journalists about their personal experiences of trafficking, or voicing controversial ideas, were not to be identified.¹³ Evidently, because the organizers would not give out personal information about the children, any child participant could therefore also be, correctly or not, assumed to be a former victim of trafficking or in a vulnerable situation.

The Organizing Committee felt that silhouette portraits or photographs with eyes blacked out should be avoided because these tend to make people look like victims or criminals. It was decided that, for the country forums at least, forum organizers should identify an official photographer and/or videographer who could select appropriate images and make any necessary alterations. All other cameras should be excluded, including during press events.

The full recommendations on protecting children's right to privacy in contact with the media were given in Part E of the *Preliminary Guidelines*.

6.5. Learning and recommendations

The importance of protecting children's privacy and control of information was not well understood by national forum organizers, with the result that the guidelines on, for example, media contact with children were not taken into account in planning, especially around media events. At least one of the sub-regional Communications Officers from Save the Children UK and ILO were present at each of the national forums and tried to ensure children's rights were protected during media contact, but they found it was virtually impossible to enforce the guidelines. In some cases semi-public 'Opening and Closing Ceremonies' were held with TV cameras and photographers invited along by local organizers.

Children's paintings were distributed without children's interpretations or information about whether they had consented to their use. The result was that paintings could not be widely exhibited or published and it was not clear what they were meant to show.

The debate over how to restrict children's contact with the media, and to what extent, has been outlined. The children at the Mekong Children's Forum selected five of their peers to attend a news conference to act as spokespeople, during which, one journalist asked the children about their experiences of trafficking. None of the children responded. It was suggested during the evaluation that this was because children had been "scared" by the briefings on media contact during the forum and that this reluctance limited the amount of news coverage the forum received. Indeed, several children indicated that they appreciated not having to be interviewed. Despite the lack of 'personal stories', the forum did attract coverage in the local

13

As with most of the child protection precautions during the forums, the final decision on this matter was with children, their parents and their chaperone.

English-language press and international media, although the international television networks that attended did not, in the end, broadcast any reports.

There were different interpretations of child protection measures among forum organizers. It is strongly recommended that the existing child protection guidelines should be reviewed but not watered down, and instead national forum organizers should be given training and support on how to implement them. While the probability that major problems will occur may be small, their consequences could be very bad for the children concerned. Organizers must take all reasonable steps to minimize the risks and be ready to deal with problems effectively.

What we learned:

- Training for forum organizers on facilitating children's participation must cover the many good reasons for strict child protection measures, including protecting children's privacy and obtaining their informed consent for use of artwork etc;
- Arrangements for media contact with child participants should be reviewed, perhaps with the help of children and local journalists;
- Information on the roles and responsibilities of facilitators, chaperones and interpreters should be distributed in a more structured and logical way. A meeting should be held for chaperones and interpreters at the start of the forum to clarify their responsibilities and what is expected of them.

Getting the message out: External communications

7

The Mekong Children's Forum was a joint advocacy initiative – “joint” between Save the Children UK and ILO (as well as other partners in some national forums) and between these adult organizations and children. It had three main advocacy objectives:

- To persuade the ministers and senior officials involved in the COMMIT process to take into account children's views (from the children's forums) when drafting the main COMMIT outputs (the Declaration and the Plan of Action);
- To make sure that these COMMIT outputs contained child-centred proposals, including children's participation; and
- To contribute to attitudinal change at all levels regarding the importance of children's participation in sustainable action against human trafficking.

The common goal of the second two objectives was that the views and participation of children should be seen as essential and central to a long-term strategy to combat human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

These objectives required a concerted and carefully timed external relations campaign, involving national and international media, to capture the attention and imagination of the public at large and especially of those in a position to influence the COMMIT process and anti-trafficking policy in the region.

The targets for advocacy could be broken down into: ministers and senior officials with influence over anti-trafficking policy and action; staff of international organizations, NGOs and others involved in anti-trafficking activities; and the general public. Coverage of the forums in local and international media could raise the profile of the initiative and help to reach all of these advocacy targets. Ministers and senior officials were invited to special dialogue sessions during each of the forums so that children could present their advocacy messages and exchange ideas about anti-trafficking policy.

7.1. Agendas for action

Forum organizers were asked to encourage the participants to draft an “Agenda of Action” containing their proposals for future action on human trafficking by governments, development organizations, civil society and children. This would be the main output of the forums, a starting point for dialogue with ministers and senior officials, a key reference for Save the Children UK and ILO in refining their programmes in the Sub-region, and a guide for future advocacy initiatives, capacity building and developing partnerships with children.

7.2. An identity for the forums

In order to project a clear identity for the forums, some decisions were made at sub-regional level about how the forums should be referred to. It was decided that the names of the forums should reflect their nature and central themes. Thus, although the initiative was called Voices of Children, it was suggested that the forums be referred to externally as “Human Trafficking - The Voices of [Mekong, Thai, etc.] Children”. The sub-regional forum would be referred to as “The Mekong Children's Forum on Human Trafficking,” with the phrase “Voices of Children” as the theme and secondary reference.

An attractive logo was designed for the Mekong Children's Forum, which was used on related documents and printed onto bags and t-shirts that were given to the child delegates and visitors to the Mekong Children's Forum.



One version of the Mekong Children's Forum Identity



The other version of the Mekong Children's Forum identity

7.3. Dialogues with ministers and senior officials

Towards the end of each national forum, the organizers planned a session for dialogue between children and ministers, senior officials and other high-level decision makers (such as representatives of UN agencies). The ministers and senior officials should all have responsibilities in areas related to anti-trafficking work, such as education, justice, labour and international cooperation. Ideally, they should be members of the national COMMIT working groups.

These dialogues were primarily opportunities for children to deliver their advocacy messages directly to the people who could most easily influence policy and action – especially the COMMIT process. Also, by having these decision makers meet and discuss with the children on a relatively equal basis – and sit face to face with some children who were former victims of trafficking and/or rarely have a voice at any level – they would see the value of children's participation and consultation and, hopefully, be more open to it in future.

7.4. Mass media strategy

Attracting coverage in both local and international media was an essential part of the external communications campaign for the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums. Not only would this alert a wide public that the forums had taken place and what the children had said, but coverage in key national and international media would hopefully positively influence ministers and senior officials to take children's views into account.

The ILO and Save the Children UK communications officers were responsible for coordinating media relations for the entire initiative, and additionally supported national

organizers in inviting media, drafting media releases and organizing media events around the forums.

The *Preliminary Guidelines* recommended that each forum organizing team assign a media coordinator (or press officer) to organize and oversee media events, and to ensure quality media coverage for the forums without jeopardizing children's rights (with regard to the child protection guidelines mentioned in 5.9 above). The media coordinator should ensure that journalists received and understood rules about contact with the children.

Forum organizers were advised to identify a small but diverse group of children who were willing to conduct one-to-one interviews with journalists. They must, of course, also have their parents' or guardians' consent. This would make it easier to coach the children and supervise interviews.

The most important media event should be at the end of the forum, preferably following the dialogue with ministers and senior officials. By this time, children would have had a chance to prepare advocacy activities for the media, and journalists would be able to talk to ministers and senior officials as well as the children. Children's performances were also encouraged as part of a closing media event to add colour and drama, a popular idea with the visual media. Another media event could be held at the opening session for the forum.

To minimize disruptions to the forums, it was recommended that journalists be invited to specially organized media events and not to forum sessions (except in special cases). One reporter from a feature section of the Bangkok Post was given exclusive access to the forum sessions and one photographer from the same publication was allowed access for two hours with special restrictions as to what and whom he could photograph. It was also suggested that journalists be excluded from dialogues with ministers and senior officials, as their presence might be distracting and would mean that children who had not consented to media contact could not take part.

7.5. Briefing for partners

Partner organizations of ILO and Save the Children UK, particularly organizations were involved in organizing the national forums and in sending children to the sub-regional forum, were invited to a briefing in the month before the sub-regional forum. At this meeting, Save the Children UK and ILO introduced the initiative and talked about the progress and plans to date. Learning from the process so far was discussed frankly, as some of the people invited to the meeting were in the middle of organizing similar participatory activities with children.

7.6. Other advocacy and information materials

National forums video

Video footage from the national children's forums was compiled and edited together by the ILO communications officer into a short video presentation with English narration. This proved useful and popular as an introduction to the initiative, and was enjoyed by the children. A second video documenting the sub-regional forum has been produced and is being used as an advocacy tool and teaching aid for child participation events (also available on CD–Rom).

Brochure

A printed brochure introducing the national and sub-regional forums was prepared by the Save the Children UK communications officer. This is attached in Annex V. A brochure summarizing the outcome of the Mekong Children's Forum has also been published.

Website: www.mekongchildrensforum.com

A special Website was created. It was designed and hosted by the Thai NGO Mirror Arts Group with content from Save the Children UK and ILO.

The Website, www.mekongchildrensforum.com, included an online forum, where children were invited to share messages and ideas, assisted by national partner organizations or ILO and Save the Children UK. Electronic versions of each national Agenda for Action as well as the MCF Recommendations are also available online.

7.7. Learning and recommendations

A comprehensive and well-planned media strategy undoubtedly helped to ensure the Mekong Children's Forum was reasonably well publicized in the English-language and international media. However, coverage of the Mekong Children's Forum and of some national forums was more varied in the local media. Sometimes this was down to poor timing (for example, scheduling press events to clash with other newsworthy events or on Friday afternoons when attendance was likely to be low) or simply poor communication with local media to alert them to the event; in other cases it was undoubtedly because local media simply have different priorities.

The forum video was a compelling way to introduce the initiative that could be shared easily in VCD format. It was

also appreciated by children who watched it during the Mekong Children's Forum.

The presence of the *Bangkok Post* reporter during the Mekong Children's Forum led to an interesting and insightful article being published in a widely read newspaper. No children complained about his presence. However, it was necessary for organizers to monitor him and organize interviews outside the normal forum sessions.

While the Internet offers good opportunities for children in different cities and countries to communicate between countries, especially when they have assistance (with typing, internet access and translation), the online forum has not been used. More communication and training with partner organizations and with children was almost certainly needed.

What we learned:

- More careful planning is needed to ensure sub-regional forums receive adequate (and appropriate) coverage in the local-language media in participating countries. National organizers may need training or more active support from the sub-regional level to ensure local reporters are aware of the event, especially if the sub-regional forum is located elsewhere;
- Inviting an “embedded” journalist should be considered for future forums. However, one should be the maximum to avoid disruption;
- The forum video idea should also be repeated in future forums and pre-filming some of the participating children in a controlled environment (only by organizers and in accordance with protection Guidelines) should be considered for hand-out material to television journalists that require personal stories.

PART TWO

THE FORUMS

Proceedings of the Mekong Children's Forum,
including summaries of the national forums

Chapter 8: The national children's forums

Chapter 9: Proceedings of
the Mekong Children's Forum



The national children's forums

8

Children forums were organized in five countries: Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. In Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, children from all over the country participated. However, in China and Thailand, the forums were held in regional cities and children were invited from neighbouring provinces where Save the Children UK and/or ILO had programmes. The China Children's Forum on Trafficking Prevention was held in Nanning, Guangxi province, and included children from Guangxi and Yunnan provinces. The Thai Children's Forum on Human Trafficking took place in Chiang Mai and involved participants from Thailand's Upper North.

The children's Agendas for Action from the national forums are included in this report as Annex II.

Because of the great differences between the situations in different countries, and the progress they had already made in organizing the forums, the Organizing Committee did not specify how these preparations should be done. Instead, the *Preliminary Guidelines* asked national forum organizers to encourage and support those children selected to participate to ask as many of their peers as possible "about their experiences and what messages they wanted to send to the national forum. [They] should also be supported to share the outcomes of the national forum with these other children and to propose follow-up action." (Section D.3.2)

The result was widely different preparation processes in different countries. In Viet Nam, the ILO/TICW team was able to invest a good deal of time and resources. In a series of community-level children's consultations, large peer groups discussed the national forum and its subject, and the children developed presentations and performances to bring to the national forum. Children and adults were also trained to facilitate these local consultations. In some national forums, unfortunately, limited preparations and information undoubtedly contributed to some children feeling, at the end of the forum, that they had "understood nothing", while experienced child advocates had dominated the meeting.

8.1. In-country partnerships

Local partners were invited to collaborate in organizing the national forums, whether by being directly involved with setting up the forum or simply selecting and supporting child participants. In some countries this allowed a much larger group of children to contribute to the forums.

8.2. National forum planning

The first draft of the *Preliminary Guidelines* (see Section 2.2 and Annex VII) was aimed at organizers of the national forums. The Internal Communications Consultant and ILO and Save the Children UK communications officers were also made available to comment on national forum plans and to provide additional advice and support where required.

However, it was decided that the in-country organizing teams should design their national forums according to local context and their own capacities and constraints. They were only required to take into account the ethical principles and practice standards in Parts B, C and E, and to implement some specific activities during the national forums (chiefly selection of representatives to attend the sub-regional Mekong Children's Forum – see *Preliminary Guidelines* Section D.6). Part of the reason for this was that planning in some countries was already quite advanced by the time the sub-regional guidelines were being prepared.

Cambodia: The Children's Forum on Promotion of Action Against Child Trafficking

Phnom Penh, 9-10 September

Fifty-two children gathered from areas of Cambodia hardest hit by human trafficking, including victims of trafficking, children at risk of trafficking, and young child rights activists with experience in anti-trafficking work.

The Cambodian Children's Agenda for Action was presented to H E Ith Sam Heng, Cambodia's Minister of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation during a closing ceremony.

The forum was held with coordination between Save the Children UK, ILO and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation; supported by UNICEF, World Education and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); co-organized by the Cambodian National Council on Children, the Children's Rights Foundation, the Children and Love Association and the Children's Committee.

China: China Children's Forum on Trafficking Prevention

Nanning, Guangxi Province, 28-31 August

The children's forum was held in Guangxi, a province in southern China, where Save the Children has an established anti-trafficking programme. Nearly 80 children from Guangxi and Yunnan provinces took part in the forum, all from areas where trafficking takes place. Many of the children were from ethnic minority groups. As key outputs, the children produced two giant cloth banners, one carrying anti-trafficking slogans and the other sewn together out of many children's paintings on the subject of trafficking. These banners were put up on the day the young participants held a dialogue with provincial officials about their Agenda for Action. The forum was co-organised by Save the Children UK, ILO, The Public Security Bureau, and the Yunnan and Guangxi Women's Federation.

Lao PDR: Child and Youth Forum Against Human Trafficking

Vientiane, 21-24 September

The Lao National Children's Forum was the last of the national forums. The Lao forum was hosted by the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Save the Children UK and ILO. Thirty-four children and young people from anti-trafficking projects in six provinces considered as high risk areas for human trafficking participated.

The children were joined by more than 400 children and youth from the Vientiane area for the dialogue with the vice-ministers of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Justice, the Lao Federation of Trade Unions, the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union, along with

representatives from UNICEF, Save the Children UK and the ILO.

Thailand: Thai Children's Forum: Human Trafficking – The Voices of Children

Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai Province, 27-30 August

The Thai forum was organized by ILO in collaboration with local partner the Mirror Arts Group. More than 50 children involved in campaigning to end human trafficking from the upper northern provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Phayao participated. Some of the children had first-hand exposure, and had been trafficked into begging gangs, prostitution, or domestic servitude. One participant, too traumatized to attend in person, spoke to the forum by telephone.

The children presented their Agenda for Action to the Permanent Secretary and the Director of the Chiang Mai Social Development and Human Security Office.

Viet Nam: National Children's Forum: Children Speak out on Prevention of Child Trafficking and Labour

Hanoi, 22-25 August

The Viet Nam forum was the first of the national forums. Thanks to a comprehensive process leading up to the forum, including training of adult and child facilitators, and local children's meetings, the 157 child participants from around Viet Nam brought to the forum a wealth of experiences and ideas from their peers, along with dramas about human trafficking. The children presented their Agenda for Action to representatives of nine ministries, including members of the National Leadership on Cooperation to Fight Child Trafficking in the Mekong Delta, and representatives from international and local organizations.

The Viet Nam forum was organized by the Viet Nam Youth Union, with support from UNICEF, UNIAP and the IOM.

8.3. Related forums

Another children's forum on human trafficking took place in Yangon, Myanmar, on 4-6 October. Although the National Children's Forum: Human Trafficking: Voices of Myanmar Children followed a similar format to the other national forums, it was wholly organized by Save the Children UK

and did not fall under the Voices of Children initiative.¹⁴ A Letter from Myanmar Children was delivered to children in the sub-regional forum. This Letter is included in Annex II.

ILO supported a forum on human trafficking at the Ban Kredtakarn Home for Girls in Thailand on 4 October. This

forum included children from around the region who had been trafficked. Three girls from Ban Kredtakarn also attended the sub-regional forum.

Children's Recommendations from this forum were given to the participants in the sub-regional forum. They are also included in Annex II.

8.4. Learning and recommendations

The character of each national forum differed considerably, from preparation to execution. Although the forum organizers were, in theory, following a single set of guidelines, they were given considerable freedom to implement the forums as they saw best. Different situations in the countries and the country programmes, different levels of capacity, different partners and different understandings of the *Preliminary Guidelines*, ensured that the experiences were very different. On the whole this was probably a good thing, although there were some concerns over whether children were adequately protected and whether the right children were included in the forums.

Nearly all the adult respondents in the evaluation described their workload for the forums as heavy. At the national level, some teams were clearly overwhelmed.

What we learned:

- Some evaluation respondents suggested that in the future, they should be able to assign one staff member who would be responsible only for forum organization for a period;
- National processes should start earlier;
- Where possible, include more partners and children – not necessarily more children taking part in national forums – but participants should be selected from a wider group of children, all of whom have opportunities to discuss the forums and put forward their ideas and suggestions.

¹⁴
See note 3.

The sub-regional forum

9

The Mekong Children's Forum was the culminating forum in the Voices of Children initiative in 2004. As well as trying to find the common ground between the ideas and concerns of the children in the different countries, it also shifted the emphasis away from national trafficking issues and towards a sub-regional perspective, looking at what countries and organizations could do together.

Held at the We-Train Centre, close to Bangkok's Don Muang Airport, from 11-17 October, the sub-regional forum attracted a good deal of attention, especially from other organizations working with children's issues in Asia. The presence of ministers or senior officials from all five countries, many of whom had travelled to Bangkok especially for the dialogue with the children, was a good indication that the initiative had achieved a high profile.

9.1. The forum team

A Forum Coordinator was responsible for overall administration and logistics, including identifying the venue and recreational trips, arranging support services, and making sure that the needs of the children and adults at the forum were appropriately met.

The Internal Communications Consultant advised on child participation issues. He was also responsible for evaluation and documentation.

A six-member facilitation team for the sub-regional forum was responsible for designing the forum programme, conducting sessions, and creating an enabling environment for children. There was at least one facilitator from each Mekong country, which meant that they could assist with translation and answer children's questions as necessary.

This team was supported by the Organizing Committee and by staff of the ILO and Save the Children UK sub-regional offices.

Finally, one staff member from Save the Children UK, and another from ILO, provided documentation and facilitation support.

9.2. Country-level preparations

A number of tasks in preparation for the sub-regional forum were supervised by Save the Children UK and ILO country offices. Along with identifying the chaperones and/or interpreters and seeking informed consent for children's travel to Bangkok and participation in the forum, the country offices had a range of responsibilities. These included arranging travel, travel insurance and necessary travel documents (including permission for children without nationality to travel from northern Thailand to Bangkok) for the child participants.

9.3. Controlling access to the forum

All children and adults directly involved in the sub-regional forum received a laminated identity badge with their photograph and a description of their role in the forum. This was primarily for security purposes. While adults' badges gave their names, the children's badges gave only a country and a number code. The reason for this was that, in meeting journalists and others, organizers wanted children to be able to choose whether to give out their real name.¹⁵ Journalists coming to the event at the UN on 15 October were registered on their arrival.

9.4. Overview of the programme

The high point of the Forum would be Day 5 (15 October), when the children would travel to the UN Conference Centre in Bangkok to meet with ministers and senior officials from the sub-region, present their recommendations for action and stage a public performance on human trafficking.

15

Although this step was not agreed with children in advance, they did not voice any objections to it.

Some children pre-selected by their peers would also attend a press conference.

The Forum programme was broken down as follows:

Monday (afternoon only): Introductions and preliminaries.

Tuesday: Sharing about national forums and Agendas for Action.

Wednesday: Drafting of sub-regional recommendations. Afternoon visit to the Children's Discovery Museum.

Thursday: Finalizing sub-regional recommendations. Planning the UN event.

Friday: UN event: Dialogue with ministers and senior officials, public performance, press conference, UN tour.

Saturday: Morning trip to Bangsai Arts and Crafts Centre. Planning follow-up. Evaluation. Closing ceremony. Party.

Sunday: Departures.

9.5. Routine activities

A number of activities took place daily, at least for the first four days of the forum.

Daily feedback

For the first three days of the forum, daily evaluations were done at the end of the afternoon. A sheet of flipchart paper was divided into three columns – Happy, Indifferent and Unhappy. With the help of translators, children wrote up comments on Post-it notes in English and stuck them in one of the columns. The organizers read these comments, took appropriate action, and then reported back to the children during the next day. However, by this time, children and their chaperones seemed confident enough to make their complaints directly.

Video recaps

A team from the Mirror Arts Group, the Chiang Rai-based NGO that co-organized the northern Thailand forum, was engaged to document the sub-regional forum on video. During the evenings, they edited together footage from the day into a short video summary that was shown in the forum the next morning. These recaps were popular with the children and useful reminders of the previous day's activities. Because children were not at the We-Train Centre on the mornings of Friday and Saturday, there were no video recaps on these days.

Children's recaps

Every country team was responsible for giving a short verbal recap of one day of the forum on the next morning.

They were asked to talk about the main activities as well as what they had learned and what they felt about the day. The relevant team was also given a handheld tape recorder and asked to make a recorded summary that would be used later in documentation. This system worked well until Thursday morning but broke down after that, partly because Thursday and Friday were very busy and tiring days and partly due to confusion over which team was responsible for which day.

Art sessions

An art teacher was engaged to lead the children in optional art activities at the end of each day. These would allow children to prepare souvenirs and gifts for their families and friends and for the ministers and senior officials who attended the dialogue. Unfortunately, sessions running overtime meant that the art sessions were cancelled on some days and started very late on others, so children were not able to enjoy this opportunity to the full.

9.6. Monday: Introductions and preliminaries

Introduction games

The first session of the forum started with a pair of games that allowed children and facilitators to introduce themselves as well as serving as ice-breakers. In the first game, everyone stood in a circle and, in turn, gave their name and a unique personal gesture. In the second, everyone selected a small object such as a pen or a key. Then they walked around, exchanging the objects along with the name of its owner. After a time, everyone was called back to stand in a circle and in turn said the name of the owner of the object they were holding. The owner then claimed it.

Practical information and forum overview

Children were introduced to the two hosting organizations and given an overview of the forum programme, safety precautions, complaint mechanisms, and various logistical details. They were also given an introduction to the contents of their forum information packs (see section 5), and told about the day recaps that they would be expected to do (see section 9.5) and the different ways they would be involved in documentation; in addition to the taped recaps, the documentation team would be interviewing children separately.

Expectations tree

The participants expressed their expectations for the forum using an “Expectations Tree” – a large picture of a tree on which the children posted their expectations.

Setting ground rules

In a lively session at the end of the afternoon, children identified a set of rules to be followed by everyone, adults and children, during the forum. Some of these were suggested by adults, but several also came directly from the children. In daily evaluations, children complained that some adults were not following the rules, and steps were taken to correct it.

9.7. Tuesday: Sharing about national forums

Introductions

After a warm-up game, four new adult guests introduced themselves to the children: Ms Thetis Mangahas of ILO, Mr Mark Capaldi and Mr Bill Tod of Save the Children UK, and Mr Richard Hermes, a journalist from the *Bangkok Post* newspaper who had been invited to cover the sub-regional forum. After this, the children watched the national forums video.

Presentation about advocacy and mass media

With advocacy so central to the Mekong Children’s Forum and national forums, it was important that all of the children shared a common understanding of the concept. Also, as there was now a journalist present (and a photographer would be visiting the next day), children needed to be able to make informed decisions about whether to grant interviews and/or permit photographs.

The Save the Children UK and ILO Communications/Information Officers and the Internal Communications Consultant led a short introduction to advocacy and media. The presentation focussed on bringing out the child delegates’ previous experiences of advocacy and media contact, including through the national forums. It also built on the “Advocacy and Media” factsheet that children had received with their first information pack (see Annex VI).

Children were first asked what they understood by the term ‘advocacy’. It was clear that there was a good level of understanding. In the end two points were emphasized: that advocacy means asking others to do something we cannot do ourselves, and that the mass media played an

important role in reaching a wider audience and, possibly influencing policy makers.

The next section focussed on the mass media, and on the personal decisions that children would need to make about whether to be interviewed by journalists and what to say. Children listed the different forms of mass media, including the Internet, and what they have in common. They also understood that mass media can influence governments and the public.

The children were asked whether they would like to be interviewed by journalists, and children who had been interviewed before were asked about the experience. Children were asked to think of the benefits of media coverage, as well as of any potential problems. Once again, they showed a clear and balanced understanding. The benefits included both personal benefits (feeling proud, speaking out) and advocacy outcomes (getting messages to a wide audience, educating other children, demonstrating to adults children’s participation in practice). The problems and concerns they voiced included the possibility that their words might be misinterpreted or deliberately misrepresented by the media, people assuming that they were victims of trafficking, and feeling uncomfortable while being interviewed.

Finally, the children were told that media would be present after the dialogue with ministers and senior officials on Friday, and that a few volunteers would be needed for a press conference. Also, children might be asked for separate interviews either by Mr Hermes or by other journalists. They were told that they would be given some interview training and that their chaperones, and either the ILO or Save the Children UK Communications Officer would be present during the interviews. They were also informed that if their parents had said they could not be photographed or interviewed, the organizers would have to follow this. Every child was asked to think carefully about whether they would like to be photographed or interviewed, or be included on the panel in the press conference, and let the organizers know later.

Presentations about national forums

Section D: 6 of the *Preliminary Guidelines* asked national forum organizers to spend some time helping children to prepare messages and materials to bring to the sub-regional forum, including a short presentation about their national forum and their national Agenda for Action. These presentations should be complemented by standing exhibitions that would be set up outside the sub-regional forum meeting room and at the public advocacy event.

Each of the country teams made their presentations in order, with adults translating into English. These were

followed by readings of the Letter from Myanmar Children and the Recommendations from the forum at Ban Kredtakarn Home for Girls.

The country teams made their presentations in alphabetical order, except for Thailand, which presented last as the host country. The presentations took very different forms. The Cambodia and Lao PDR teams used Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. The China team talked about some of the campaigning work they had done before and during their forum and showed two large banners bearing anti-trafficking messages the children had prepared, including one that consisted of colourful paintings and slogans on cloth that had been sewn together into a giant square.

The Viet Nam team started its presentation with a short drama about a poor girl trying desperately to support her blind mother and being tricked and sold to a brothel. Finally she leaves and is accepted by a shelter.

The Thai team started its presentation with a series of short sketches about the problems of stateless people, such as being unable to enrol in school, not being able to travel and being reduced to begging. The presentation closed with a professionally made video in English about the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, focussing on the Thai response.

Messages from other children in the region

Following the five country presentations, the children heard two more messages from children who had had similar forums on human trafficking: a "Letter from the Myanmar Children" and a set of "Recommendations" from children at the Ban Kredtakarn Home for Girls. After a short introduction, the children watched part of a video on the Save the Children UK children's forum in Myanmar. Then children from various countries who had been sent to the forum by Save the Children UK or its local partners read out the Letter from Myanmar Children in their own languages, and the other children followed in their translated versions. The chaperones from Ban Kredtakarn Home for Girls gave a short introduction to the home, and then read out the Recommendations from the Ban Kredtakarn forum. Participants asked many questions about the content of the Recommendations and about the home.

9.8. Wednesday: Preparing for advocacy

Wednesday and Thursday were spent drafting a set of Recommendations that represented the views of all of the children who had participated in the process so far.

Children also needed to prepare themselves for the dialogue with the ministers, a public performance and the press conference on Friday.

Introduction to COMMIT

Mr Phil Robertson of the UNIAP visited the forum on Wednesday morning to talk to the children briefly about the COMMIT process, including the UNIAP's role in it. His short presentation was followed by a lively question-and-answer session.

Visit to the Children's Discovery Museum

On Wednesday afternoon, the children took a break from their hard work in the forum to visit the Children's Discovery Museum. There they had the chance to learn from interactive displays about various topics and to try their hand at broadcasting in a model television studio.

9.9. Drafting the Mekong Children's Recommendations

Drafting of the sub-regional advocacy messages that the children would present to the ministers and senior officials on Friday took up much of Wednesday and Thursday. The facilitators and organizers collaborated in designing a drafting process for the Mekong Children's Recommendations. Rather than create an entirely new document, the essence of this process was to help the child participants to find the common concerns and ideas in the existing national Agendas for Action and combine them in a single document with the approval of all participants.

Template for the Recommendations

The drafting process started with a short presentation about the process and introducing a suggested template that the organizers had developed based on the national Agendas for Action. This template divided the Recommendations into several parts:

- Who are we? Why are we here?
- Trafficking in the Mekong Sub-region: Nature/scale, causes, impacts, who is affected
- What we believe (fundamental principles): Rights of children; responsibilities of children, adults, families, society, media, government etc.
- Proposals: What should be done and who should do it?

Clustering

The first activity of the drafting process was to find out what was in the Agendas for Action by breaking them down into common areas. To facilitate this, the organizers had printed each point or article in the agendas for action (plus the Recommendations from the Ban Kredtakarn forum) separately, in the original language with the English translation below. Large sheets of paper were laid out on the floor, each with one of the 15 recommendations in the Letter from Myanmar translated at the top of it. The country teams (including the participants from Ban Kredtakarn) put the parts of their own Agenda for Action along with the most similar part of the Letter from Myanmar.

Labelling

Next, each country team was given the job of finding an appropriate descriptive label for each of three of these clusters. These labels were then presented to the other teams and the organizers, who advised on which groups could be combined.

Drafting team

As the drafting process had fallen behind schedule and there would be no more time during the day's programme to continue with it, children were asked to volunteer to form a drafting team that could continue work on the Recommendations on Wednesday evening.

Wednesday evening

Each drafter chose one of the introductory or concluding parts of the template above for their country team to draft. Helped at first by the drafting team, organizers did some work on tidying up the clustering the children had done during the day. They tried to do this in a way that did not interfere with the children's ideas and suggestions, but would help to speed up the process. These suggested changes were presented to the children on Thursday morning for their comments and approval.

Finding the common ground

Thursday morning's drafting began with a briefing on the rest of the process. Then each country team was assigned a few clusters. Within these, they should find the common themes and then draft Recommendations.

The clusters handled by the different countries were as follows:

Viet Nam: Economic and social development.

China: Law development; management and follow-up of returnees.

Cambodia: Education; awareness raising and advocacy.

Thailand: Cooperation; child rights; children's participation; family welfare.

Lao PDR: Helping victims; cooperation; health services and protection.

When this activity was complete, each country presented its draft Recommendations to the other children and they were discussed by the group before being given final approval. Adults asked some questions to help children clarify the Recommendations.

Finalizing and translating the Recommendations

As time was limited, it was decided not to finalize the text of the Recommendations in plenary. Instead, the children who would be presenting the Recommendations at the UN event came together with the organizers during Thursday afternoon to work on it and choose a name for the document. Once again, time ran out, and the presenters gave the organizers permission to make finishing touches to the text. Once again, they were careful not to affect the children's intended meaning, only their expression. After the text was finalized, facilitators and/or interpreters translated the Recommendations back into the children's languages to give to the children and to ministers and senior officials. The final versions of the Mekong Children's Recommendations in Mekong languages are given in Annex III.

Thursday: Preparing for advocacy continued

Briefing on the UN event

After the recaps of the previous day, the organizers started Thursday morning with a presentation about Friday's advocacy event at the UN Conference Centre. This covered the programme for the day and the logistical details. The briefing focussed on the dialogue with senior officials and ministers. One child from each country would read out the Children's Recommendations, and another two children would be "MCs" to introduce the children's performances.

Next, children received another briefing on the press conference that would follow the dialogue. Only five children would sit on a panel and take questions from the media (others were free to join if they wished). In response to children's questions, the organizers emphasized that children were free to say whatever they wanted in the press conference, but that the organizers would interrupt if the journalists asked questions that were too personal. Children could reply in their own languages, and their interpreters would sit with them. Another child asked who would be responsible if a child participant was misquoted;

the response was that there was no real way to control what journalists write. The organizers undertook to monitor the press coverage and demand a correction or an apology if there was serious misreporting.

Finally, the children were told that space and time had been set aside for them to make a presentation to journalists, UN staff and visitors after the dialogue with ministers and senior officials. The children were free to use this time and space as they wished, but it was suggested they could do some visually attractive performances, which might include presenting their Recommendations.

Assigning tasks

After the final plenary session on drafting the Recommendations, children were selected for the various responsible roles during the UN event: presenting the Recommendations in the dialogue with ministers and senior officials, MCs and press conference panellists. Children were asked to volunteer for each of these, and then approved by the group.

Final preparations

For the rest of the afternoon, children split into groups to be briefed on, and prepare themselves for, their various roles. The children who had not been given any of the other responsible roles worked together to think of questions to ask the ministers and senior officials, and then to work in their country groups on performances and artwork. For many children, this continued late into the evening.

9.10. Friday: The UN event

Early in the morning, the children travelled by coach from the We-Train Centre to the UN Conference Centre (UNCC) in Bangkok.

The dialogue

The children's first major activity at the UNCC was the dialogue with ministers and senior officials. The venue for this was a meeting room in the UNCC.

Along with the ministers and senior officials, representatives of several UN agencies were also invited to the dialogue. The full list of ministers and officials who attended the dialogue is given below.

Cambodia, H E You Ay, Secretary of State, Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs

Cambodia, Mr Thong Chamroen, Deputy Director of Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran and Youth Rehabilitation

China (Yunnan Province), Mr Li Jiping, Director, Comprehensive Management Office on Social Security of Yunnan Provincial Government

Lao PDR, Mr Khamphan Anlava, Deputy Director for Asia-Pacific and Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Thailand, Mr Kirasak Chancharaswat, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

Thailand, Mr Somchai Charoen-Umnuaisuke, Director of Measures and Mechanisms Development Groups, Bureau of Child Promotion and Protection

Thailand, Ms Srisak Thaiarry, Executive Director, National Council for Child and Youth Development

Thailand, Ms Jirada Wiwatana, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

Thailand, Ms Ladda Benjatchah, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

Thailand, Ms Panita Kambhu, Director, Office of Welfare Promotion and Protection of Vulnerable Groups

Thailand, Ms Suvichit Sataman, Chief of Measures and Mechanisms Development Groups, Bureau of Child Promotion and Protection

Thailand, Ms Thitikalaya, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security

Thailand, Ms Yanee Lertkrai, Director, Ban Kredtrakarn Home for Girls

Viet Nam, Mr Hung Pham Van, Deputy Head of Social Evil Prevention Unit, Ministry of Public Security

Mr Tom Beloe, Social Development Adviser, UK Department for International Development (DFID)

Mr Phillip Robertson, Programme Manager, UNIAP

Ms Christine Evans-Klock, Director, ILO Sub-Regional Office for East Asia

Ms Panudda Boonpala, Senior Child Labour Specialist, ILO Sub-Regional Office for East Asia

The dialogue commenced with introductions, welcome speeches and showings of the national forums video and a short compilation of video from the sub-regional forum.

Next, the children who had been chosen as presenters read out short sections of the Mekong Children's Recommendations in their own languages, and these were read out in English by the interpreters.

Children were then asked to read out their questions for the ministers and senior officials one after the other. Ministers and senior officials from each country then responded to whichever question(s) they chose.

After the ministers' responses, the dialogue was opened up for ministers and officials to question children and children to respond and comment on the minister's and officials' answers.

The dialogue closed with messages of thanks from Mr Beloe and Ms Evans-Klock.

Performances

After the dialogue, the children made their way to an area of the UNCC foyer that had been set aside for them. (Children who did not want to be photographed by journalists were taken straight to the lunch room.) A "marketplace" of stalls and other artwork had been set up there in the morning for visitors to browse, and chairs had been set up facing a "stage." Several journalists, UN staff,

Box 1. Children's questions for the ministers and senior officials

What do the government officials think about our proposals/statements and how do they intend to implement them? When will they do it? For how long?

How can governments turn the COMMIT MoU into law?

What are governments doing to solve trafficking-related problems? In particular, what are they doing about officials involved in the trafficking process? What punishment do the governments give for traffickers?

All Mekong countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child; how do we ensure that our rights are met?

What policies and measures do the governments have to support victims in preparing to return home? How do governments prevent abuse and protect child migrants?

Government ministers, senior officials and other visitors attended the children's performances.

Led by two young MCs, each country team performed a short drama, dancing, singing or recitation.

Press conference

Following the performances, most children went down to a specially prepared lunch room, while the five press panellists attended the press conference. Assisted by translators and facilitators, the children answered questions from national and international media. Separate interviews with organizers and children were arranged after the press conference with some of the children who had agreed to one-on-one discussions.

UN tour and departure

After a lunch attended by children and some adult visitors, the children were given a brief presentation on the work of the UN, followed by an enjoyable and popular quiz. A tour of the UNCC facilities allowed the children to explore one of the main conference chambers. In the early afternoon, the children left the UNCC for an afternoon of shopping and relaxing.

9.11. Saturday: What next?

Most of the last full day of the sub-regional forum was spent at Bangsai Arts and Crafts Centre. The organizers felt that, after such a full schedule and the excitement of Friday's event, the children deserved a break. The morning was spent visiting the centre's various exhibits. In the afternoon, the participants convened in the open air, under trees, for the last working session of the forum.

Planning follow-up

The first activity of the final session saw the participants splitting up into their country teams to decide what activities children could do to implement the Mekong Children's Recommendations. This included support that the children would need from Save the Children UK, ILO and other adult organizations. These follow-up plans were then read out to the group (see box 2 in chapter 10).

Ms Edelweiss Silan and Ms Thetis Mangahas responded to the children's suggestions and told them what kind of support they could expect from Save the Children UK and ILO. They also outlined how the two organizations would be following up and reviewing their programme activities in the light of the children's Recommendations. Finally they also told the children the names of the ILO and Save the

Children UK officers at national and sub-regional levels who they could contact with any questions or requests.

Expectations check

Next, children were reminded of the expectations for the forum that they had given on Monday afternoon. They thought about which of these had been met.

Closing ceremony

To end the day and the forum, the children and organizers stood in a big circle on the grass for some closing words of thanks and hope, and to present gifts.

Party

To give the children a chance to celebrate the end of the forum with their new friends, the organizers held a party at the We-Train Centre, giving children who had asked for it the chance to prepare some dishes from their country, and everyone the chance to sing and dance into the evening. It was also an opportunity to celebrate the birthday of one of the participants. During the party, children were asked to take a little time out to complete evaluation forms (see Annex XI) with the help of their interpreters.

felt that they were not experienced enough in facilitating for children, and that perhaps the facilitators chosen should have been closer in age to that of the children.

The closing party was a well-organized and much-appreciated opportunity for the children to celebrate their achievements and relax with their new-found friends. This should always be included in forum programmes.

What we learned:

- Facilitators should be provided with training in how to facilitate for children. This could be a role for young adults with experience of trafficking and/or anti-trafficking work.
- Much greater priority should be on ending forum sessions at or near the scheduled time. Children should never have to work late into the evening.
- Children should be more actively involved in planning and facilitating forum sessions.
- Thought should be given to management of dialogues between children and senior officials. They should be made more child friendly, informal and interactive. This could include having children chairing the sessions. Also, equal emphasis should be placed on adults questioning children.

9.12. Learning and recommendations

The feedback from adults and children give a strong impression that the Mekong Children's Forum was both valuable and enjoyable, even if it involved hard work. Clearly some things could have been done better, but overall it was a highly successful event.

The number of interpreters seems to have been adequate to allow children to follow and contribute to forum discussions, especially with the help of the facilitators from each country. The interpreters themselves were dedicated and did a good job with a professional attitude. One small concern was that at the end of the forum sessions, the interpreters were too tired to continue interpreting, so children could not always communicate with their new friends.

There was a good level of transparency and very little interference by adults in children's free discussions and decision-making. However, children were not much involved in planning and facilitating the Mekong Children's Forum – certainly, they had been much more involved in these activities during some national forums.

A large multi-lingual facilitating team was undoubtedly a major asset in the forum. There was a good mix of games, which children clearly enjoyed. However, some facilitators

PART THREE

LOOKING FORWARD

Follow-up, learning and recommendations

Chapter 10: Follow-up

Chapter 11: Evaluation report

Chapter 12: Conclusions, learning
and recommendations



Follow-up

10

Two prominent themes of required 'follow-up' emerged in the Saturday session. The first of these is child-led advocacy and awareness-raising, whether through mass media or through their own local action. The other is the desire for future children's forums to be held at national

and sub-regional level and, for some countries, at provincial and local levels. These considerations suggest that the children valued their involvement in the forums, which is born out by their evaluations (see Chapter 11).

Box 2. Children's follow-up plans

Cambodia

National-level: Support organization of a children's forum at national level in 2005; Assist in providing training to children and children's representatives in follow-up, monitoring and evaluation. *Regional level:* Organize a regional children's forum like this in 2006; Provide technical support and financial support to each country to implement and follow up on activities.

Lao PDR

For the Government: We want to have a children's forum at national level once a year; A sub-regional forum could be organized once every two years, and countries should take turns to host it; Disseminate information on human trafficking at local level throughout the country using different means such as meetings with friends and using media like radio and TV and through the Lao Youth Union's programmes.

China

We want the Government to publicize its promises through mass media such as newspapers and the Internet; We want to ask the Government to establish a monitoring system in the mass media, for example we could have a column in a newspaper; We need awareness raising about anti-trafficking activities at school and community levels in different forms, such as school meetings and quizzes on anti-trafficking knowledge; We should organize some volunteers to regularly visit remote areas to distribute information, education and communication (IEC) and self-protection materials. *Regional level:* We want more communication between countries through study tours, meetings, forums etc.

Thailand

We will bring knowledge gained from this meeting to disseminate at school level and organize awareness-

raising/public relations activities in schools; Present this information further to community leaders, municipalities, district level, provincial level and then country level and beyond; Present information on trafficking to tribal associations like the Hmong association for information as well as for primary prevention; Organize children's forums on human trafficking to follow up at provincial level; A children's forum at Mekong level every two years in order to follow up and monitor and share new information about human trafficking; Coordinate with community-based radio programmes and other media channels to disseminate information about trafficking and establish relevant agencies at community, provincial and national levels. Finally, all of this can only be achieved if Ms. Thetis and Ms. Edel collaborate with us. Thanks in advance for that!

Viet Nam

Organize workshops to share information about the regional forum in localities, from October to December 2004. Guidance, technical support and funds will be needed from adults; Communicate with children about child trafficking and prevention monthly, in schools, communities and cities. Support needed will include funding to print leaflets, the Vietnamese Agenda for Action and the Mekong Children's Recommendations; Meet senior officials at national and local levels to give them our recommendations to support victims of trafficking and children at risk of trafficking. This should take place every year, around the time of the summer holidays. For this we will need the experience and support of adults; Generate the conditions so it is possible for children at high risk and victims to take part in regional forums and national forums during summer holidays to share experiences, information and conditions for study for visits. From adults this will require funds, guidance and organization support.

10.2. Follow-up advocacy in the COMMIT senior officials meeting

In late October, Save the Children UK staff attended the second senior officials meeting in Yangon, Myanmar which immediately preceded the ministerial consultation where the COMMIT MoU was signed. They gave copies of the Mekong Children's Recommendations along with the Mekong Children's Forum brochure (Annex V) to the national government delegations in English, along with the national children's agenda for action from the appropriate country in the national language.

Mr Mark Capaldi and Ms Edelweiss Silan lobbied some government delegates, asking them to find ways to take up the children's recommendations during the development of the framework for the COMMIT Plan of Action, which was being drafted during the senior officials meeting. Following this advocacy, the Lao PDR delegation raised the issue of promoting children's participation and considering the children's recommendations. The chair of the session responded that the MoU and the framework were consistent with the Children's Recommendations, but that as some of the Recommendations were very detailed, it would be better to discuss them during activity planning in the next senior officials meeting, to be held in March 2005 in Viet Nam.

10.3. Reviewing our programmes

The children's national Agendas for Action and the Mekong Children's Recommendations have already been used as key resources in reviews of Save the Children UK and ILO programme activities in several countries. In Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, the children's concerns about improved access to education for minorities and children without nationality have led to planning by ILO of a survey on educational opportunities for all.

Evaluation report

11

Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to find out what people directly involved in the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums thought of the initiative overall, how successful they found specific aspects of the process, what lessons they thought should be learned from it, and what suggestions they had for carrying out similar work in the future. Another intention was to get a first impression of the initiative's success in influencing policymakers and other adults involved in anti-trafficking work.

Scope of the evaluation

The evaluation looked at:

- How respondents viewed the overall success and appropriateness for fulfilling the Mekong Children's Forum initiative's objectives;
- How partnership, particularly the central partnership between Save the Children UK and ILO-IPEC, benefited or constrained the process;
- How far and how appropriately the media and advocacy activities in the forums promoted the idea of children's participation in anti-trafficking work and made children's voices heard;
- Organization, administration and internal communications;
- How well the adults in the process created enabling and appropriate environments for children's participation;
- Suggestions for the future.

The evaluation is limited to the impressions of those directly involved in the process. It does not evaluate the initiative's success in achieving its advocacy objectives (see below), which would need to be conducted several months after the event(s).

Although the evaluation asked questions about the national and sub-regional forums, particularly about their combined outcomes, all questions about process refer to the sub-regional forum only. The exception to this is the questionnaire sent to the national partner organizations, who were asked principally about the national forums.

Methods

The evaluation is based on responses to specially prepared questionnaires. Five different questionnaires were prepared:

1. For child delegates
2. For chaperones, interpreters, facilitators and observers
3. For forum organizers (including administrative staff and consultants)
4. For national-level partner organizations
5. For ministers and senior officials who came for a dialogue with the child delegates.

Where organizers also acted as chaperones, interpreters or facilitators, they were asked to complete form 2.

Form 1 was given to children on the last day of the sub-regional children's forum, and completed with the help of their interpreters (who were asked to encourage children to be honest and not to be afraid of criticizing the forum or the organizers). On this form, children responded to each question by marking a cross on a scale from ☹ to ☺, and space was left for them to make specific comments, if they wished.

On the questionnaires for adults, most questions were in the form of attitude statements and could be answered by selecting "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree", "strongly disagree" or "No opinion/don't know". Once again, space was left under these questions for comments and suggestions. However, some questions were in the form of open questions, and answering them was optional. Forms 2 and 3 were similar, with only very minor differences in two or three questions. Form 4 consisted mostly of open questions or different optional answers; however, some questions were shared with forms 2 and 3.

The questionnaires for adults were distributed by email, either directly to the respondent from the evaluator or indirectly through the ILO-IPEC sub-regional office or through ILO-IPEC or Save the Children UK national offices, between October and November 2004. They were designed to be completed electronically and returned by email.

Respondents

Questionnaires for children were given to all of the 28 child participants in the sub-regional Mekong Children's Forum. Questionnaires were also sent to all facilitators, chaperone- interpreters and observers who attended the sub-regional forum. They were also sent to Save the Children UK and ILO-IPEC sub-regional staff and consultants involved in organizing the Mekong Children's Forum and national forums, and to the heads of country teams and the national staff who had been focal points for organizing the national or provincial forums and making arrangements for children's participation in the sub-regional forum. Via national offices, questionnaires were sent to national partner organizations that had been involved in the national or provincial forums. Finally, questionnaires were supposed to be sent via country offices to ministers and senior officials who attended the dialogue with children in Bangkok on 15 October (although in Thailand this did not happen).

Those who responded were:

- Nineteen child participants
- Two national partner organizations (both from Cambodia)
- Five facilitators
- Seven chaperones and/or interpreters
- Seven sub-regional forum organizers

Among the facilitators and chaperones, three were also involved in organizing national forums.

Analysis

This evaluation report does not pretend to be scientific or statistically valid. Under the various headings, it presents a short summary of the overall combined response, the total numbers of each optional answer to relevant questions, and then a summary of comments and suggestions people made in their answers. Where questions were similar in different forms, the answers have been combined. Where respondents marked "no opinion/don't know", no score was counted. In the case of the children's questionnaire, where the children answered by marking a cross on a scale, the scales were then measured and divided into 10 and given a numerical score according to where the cross was. When children did not mark a cross on the scale, an appropriate score was given based on their written comments. In some cases where a very high score was given but it was clear from the children's comments that they were less than satisfied, the score was adjusted down.

11.1. Responses: Overall

In your perception, the MCF process was a success overall (forms 2 and 3)

Strongly agree: 14 *Agree: 9*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The MCF process was an appropriate and effective way to achieve **Objective 1:** "To demonstrate the value of participatory approaches in the search for sustainable solutions to the problem of trafficking" (forms 2 and 3)

Strongly agree: 13 *Agree: 8*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The MCF process was an appropriate and effective way to achieve **Objective 2:** "To provide a venue for children in the sub-region to collectively articulate their perspectives on the issue of trafficking and ill-prepared migration, and share their experiences of participating in anti-trafficking action" (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 14 *Agree: 7*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The MCF process was an appropriate and effective way to achieve **Objective 3:** "To facilitate a process for children to contribute to the design of policies and programmes addressing trafficking at the sub-regional level" (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 13 *Agree: 8*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

In your perception, was the national/provincial children's forum your organization helped to organize a success overall (form 4)?

Strongly agree: 1 *Agree: 1*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

As can be seen, the responses to the Mekong Children's Forum process overall were overwhelmingly positive from all adult groups of respondents (children were not asked to give an overview of the entire process). Comments reflected this. However, concern was expressed that putting too much priority on highly publicized national or sub-regional events like this could give a skewed impression of children's participation – that it is only about this kind of event, not about a pervasive change in decision-making processes and working methods at all levels. It was also noted that the success of the process really depended on sustained follow-up work that is beyond the scope of this evaluation.

The most prominent suggestions from adults were that in future there should be more preparation time and activities, especially at national and local levels, to allow a greater number of children to contribute to the process, especially children at risk of, or with experience of, trafficking. These are looked at in more detail in the following sections.

11.2. Responses: Media and advocacy

How to manage contact between media and the child participants was a bone of contention throughout the planning and execution of the forums. The cause was the apparent tension between fulfilling children's rights to be heard (and the wider advocacy objectives of the initiative) and the responsibility of the organizers to protect children, especially the more vulnerable children, from the possible negative effects of being (rightly or wrongly) publicly identified as a victim of trafficking, misquoted or slandered in media coverage.

Managing contact with journalists

Media arrangements during the children's forums (informed consent to media contact, restricted contact between journalists and children, adults accompanying children during interviews) were appropriate and successful (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 5 *Agree: 13*
Disagree: 1 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The comments on this question reflected the opposing views on this issue. While people were generally pleased with the level of coverage the sub-regional forum received (see below), there was recognition that the media arrangements had to some extent limited the quantity and perhaps quality of the coverage. However, the importance of protecting children's privacy was also mentioned frequently. Overall, adult respondents seemed to see the restrictions on media contact as unfortunate but probably a necessary precaution. It was suggested that the media arrangements should be reviewed for future forums, perhaps with the involvement of children and journalists.

It was also noted that in fact whether to be photographed or interviewed, and what information to tell journalists, was left up to the children (and their parents), based on information on the potential benefits and hazards; therefore the quality of the information that they (children and parents) received to base this decision was crucial.

Respondents noted that guidelines on media arrangements were rarely followed in the national forums without a lot of prompting from visiting sub-regional organizers.

Although children were not asked to evaluate the media arrangements, the children's comments on this issue are instructive. While the children expressed general satisfaction with the sub-regional advocacy event at the UN, which included a press conference and at which some journalists were present for public performances, the only specific references to the media they made suggest that they did not welcome media contact: three said they were glad they did not have to do media interviews (three participants who had not consented to be photographed and were thus protected from media contact), while one (who had not indicated that he/she did not want media contact) complained that "I had to keep avoiding the reporter(s) because I didn't want to be interviewed".

Getting the message out

The children's messages from the **national/provincial children's forum** in your country, and the value of participatory approaches in anti-trafficking policy-making and planning, were **well publicized and promoted** through the MCF process (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 5 *Agree: 13*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The children's messages from the **sub-regional children's forum**, and the value of participatory approaches in anti-trafficking policy-making and planning, were **well publicized and promoted** through the MCF process (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 11 *Agree: 9*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

It is clear that most respondents were very satisfied with the success of the sub-regional forum in promoting and publicizing the children's messages and the value of participatory approaches, but less so with the national forums.

"Embedded" Bangkok Post reporter

A reporter from the *Bangkok Post* English-language newspaper, Richard Hermes, was invited to observe all of the sessions of the sub-regional forum and to interview children.

The presence of a **reporter from the Bangkok Post** during the forum sessions was appropriate and worthwhile (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 5 *Agree: 11*
Disagree: 2 *Strongly disagree: 0*

It was recognized that Richard was extremely careful and cooperative while he was at the forum, and that the long feature article he wrote was positive and sympathetic; certainly this was a significant gain in terms of media coverage of the forum. There were some concerns that his presence may have disturbed the children, and it was suggested that more thought should go into how to allow access for such "embedded" reporters. The children did not mention this issue at all in their evaluation, suggesting that they were not particularly disturbed by it.

Indications of success

Respondents were asked for any anecdotal evidence suggesting that the MCF process had succeeded in changing attitudes and behaviour related to children's participation in finding solutions to human trafficking. A selection of their responses (edited) is given in Box 3. They suggest changes in attitude among children, among partners, among Save the Children UK and ILO-IPEC and among government officials.

Box 3. Indications of attitude and behaviour change from our advocacy

Selected edited answers from question 4 on forms 2 and 3, and questions 3 and 4 on form 4.

- In Cambodia, the Minister said in his closing remarks " I strongly believe that your effort in this forum is a contribution to promote children's rights. I will read these recommendations and put them in the national plan of (action) on anti-trafficking and sex exploitation of children 2005-2009."
- The responses of the government officials at the MCF UN event were clearly of approval of the children's efforts to participate and demand consultation to hear their perspectives.
- Dr. Saisuree, a COMMIT official from Thailand, is quoted in the *Bangkok Post*: "Adults like us may not have thought about the issue as being related to trafficking she says. "But we really need to work on this more intensively." (*Bangkok Post*, Page 1, Outlook Section 2004. 10. 2).
- In a meeting with the Bureau of Anti-trafficking in Women and Children in Thailand, they referred to the experiences of the Children's Forum in Ban Kredtakarn as very positive and asked us to continue to facilitate similar events as well as build the capacity of staff to carry out similar exercises in the future.
- At the COMMIT meeting in Yangon and the CSEC MTR meeting in Bangkok, all of the Mekong countries mentioned the MCF.
- Ms Vaddey now thinks of doing consultations in a similar way for their work in the Cambodian National Children's Council.
- The chaperones from Ban Kredtakarn Home for Girls said that the three participants were more cheerful and took more initiative, were more willing to express their views and make comments, and more willing to participate when they returned to the home.
- The TICW Yunnan team was impressed by the children's participation in the national forum, and they have prepared to involve children in their action programmes, such as children's participation in painting picture books for printing and distribution.
- The whole process was actually a process of change in the attitudes and behaviour of children, partners and even Save the Children staff, giving them a better and deeper understanding of children's participation; it might be the first time that our partners know how much children can do on things about themselves and see the ideas of children about trafficking.
- Not exactly attitude and behaviour change in IPEC; at country level, we have just added the activities that were requested by the children at the national forum regarding their rights to education; we plan to have a survey on educational opportunities for all in one province.
- Partners are more comfortable with selection of child representatives by children themselves.
- Other children and youth club propose to join the forum. Some NGOs and government institutions are developing their programmes for child participation. The children's recommendations are being considered in developing the new National Plan.
- I have heard Cambodian government officials (Ministers and Secretaries of States) speak favourably about the value of children's participation in the MCF process in their official speeches.

11.3. Responses: Organization, administration and internal communications

Working as partners

The Mekong Children's Forum process is part of Voices of Children, a joint advocacy initiative between Save the Children UK and ILO-IPEC. It also drew in several other partners at national and sub-regional levels. Partnership added significant value in the MCF process (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 14 *Agree: 6*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

Do you think partnership added significant value in the national/provincial children's forum process? (national partners).

Much value added: 2 *Some value added: 0*
Little value added: 0 *No value added: 0*

From the responses, it was clear that partnership was extremely valuable and beneficial and should continue. General comments about this highlighted the smooth, cooperative working relationship between the two core partners at sub-regional level at the organization stage. Another very positive sign was the recognition that individuals and partners were very clearly putting the best interests and the success of the initiative first. However, lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the partners were occasionally mentioned in connection with national forums and the sub-regional forum itself.

Adult respondents were asked to list the main benefits and constraints they had seen connected with partnership.

Benefits

Very often mentioned were the complementary areas of expertise and experience that the different organizations brought to the partnership, which both benefited the process directly and helped each partner to learn from the other. The individual reputations and relationships of ILO-IPEC and Save the Children UK, as well as other partners at national level, made it possible to reach more children by involving more partners and officials at different levels; even more importantly, it meant children's voices were

heard more widely and, because such high-profile organizations were behind the initiative, were given more attention. Each partner also made new contacts with organizations and individuals in the other's network through the initiative. Sharing resources and workload was also cited often as a significant benefit. It was suggested that good working relationship at the heart of the initiative set a good example for the children.

Constraints

The main constraint was seen as the differences in organizational policies, priorities and procedures that were not always dealt with satisfactorily. While on the whole partners were willing to compromise, at national level especially, conflicts of working methods and interests posed unexpected challenges.

A constraint was the amount of additional time that this kind of cooperation inevitably requires. Also linked to the nature of partnership was the occasional difficulty of communication.

Logistical arrangements and administrative support were well done in the sub-regional forum.

Strongly agree: 9 *Agree: 12*
Disagree: 1 *Strongly disagree: 0*



Venue

environment, meeting room, accommodation, food etc.

You received adequate and appropriate support, including information (e.g. the *Preliminary Guidelines*, emails, briefings) to understand and fulfil your roles and responsibilities (form 2).

As an organizer

Strongly agree: 4 *Agree: 1*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

As a facilitator or chaperone/interpreter

Strongly agree: 7¹⁶ *Agree: 4*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 1*

Adults involved in the MCF process received adequate and appropriate support, including information (e.g. the

16

It should be noted that one respondent responded "strongly agree" to this but used the comments to complain about a specific aspect of the information provided.

Preliminary Guidelines, emails, briefings) to understand and fulfil their roles and responsibilities (form 3).

Strongly agree: 0 *Agree: 7*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

Respondents praised the hard work done on logistics and administration. However, there were a lot of concerns over the venue and facilities. This received the lowest approval rating in the children's evaluation, and children complained about the dormitory accommodation and food at the We-Train Centre. Although attempts were made to address the main problems, children evidently still felt them at the end of the forum. Adult respondents mainly echoed the children's concerns. Some thought that We-Train was well located, being away from the city; others said that children would have liked to be in central Bangkok as they wanted more chances to explore.

Facilitators and, to a lesser extent, chaperones and interpreters in the sub-regional forum, were highly satisfied with the support they had received to carry out their responsibilities. The chief concerns expressed were related to the delivery of policies and guidelines, which is covered in the section below; to receiving information and materials (such as texts for translation) too late; and to details of allowances and fees for chaperones and interpreters: there was lack of clarity until after the forum about who would pay these, when and how much. Most facilitators, chaperones and interpreters described their workload as "heavy".

Internal communications

The policies and guidelines developed for the MCF process were appropriate to protect children's rights and best interests (forms 2 and 3).

Strongly agree: 12 *Agree: 7*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The response to the policies and guidelines was generally positive, particularly that they were focused on the best interests of the children and that they could be reused for future Mekong Children's Forums and similar initiatives by others.

The main concerns were over whether the guidelines and policies were read and understood (or at least not followed). The *Preliminary Guidelines* were relatively long and complicated and reached some national-level organizers only shortly before their national forums. It was suggested that a more user-friendly version of the *Guidelines* be developed and that organizers of national or sub-national forums be given more support, perhaps in the form of training, on how to implement them. The policies and guidelines on media contact are dealt with separately in 0 above.

11.4. Responses: Enabling children's participation

Mix of participants

The Mekong Children's Forum process involved an appropriate mix of children (form 2).

National forum:
Strongly agree: 7 *Agree: 4*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

Sub-regional forum:
Strongly agree: 7 *Agree: 5*
Disagree: 0 *Strongly disagree: 0*

The Mekong Children's Forum process overall involved an appropriate mix of children (form 3).

Strongly agree: 1 *Agree: 4*
Disagree: 2 *Strongly disagree: 0*

Respondents showed very different attitudes towards the involvement of child advocates who were not in groups vulnerable to trafficking and had no experience of being trafficked. Some said it was appropriate to include these children. Slightly more said that involving trafficking victims was more important and added credibility to the children's statements. Several respondents noted that when these different groups of children are mixed, the more privileged are likely to dominate and the vulnerable children and victims would not be heard; the facilitators must be careful to ensure all children can participate equally and have an equal chance of being selected to participate in national and sub-regional forums.

It was apparent that in some national forums, some children were hand-picked by adults and not picked by their peers; respondents commented that it was appropriate that children pick their own representatives.

Respondents had several suggestions for how to involve more children, especially those in the most affected groups. These included:

- Children's camps in target villages to select participants.
- Keep the same selection process, but get more partners involved.
- Hold forums in places where it is easier for these children to access.
- Early contact with migrant networks in migrant-dense locations.
- Separate forums for child victims, like the Ban Kredtakarn forum.
- Sub-regional organizers should be more involved and earlier with the selection process at national level.

Finally, there was a warning that the privacy of child victims must be protected; if the organizers could not guarantee it, they should not try to involve these children.

for children to discuss and develop their ideas and experiences in plenary.

Forum programme and facilitation

It's the end of the Forum. How are you feeling?



The Forum

Was it done well? Did children have enough control or too much?



Being heard

Do you feel that your voice was heard? Do the "Children's Recommendations" reflect your ideas?



Fun!

games, trips, free time, forum sessions, etc.



Respondents variously suggested that there should have been fewer activities or there should have been more games and rest time. However, there were also comments that the forum programme should have been for fewer days, showing the difficulties that the facilitators faced in planning and executing a meaningful forum in a limited time. One suggestion was that if children had had more freedom to choose and lead their own processes, they would have been able to work quicker.

Most children used the "Anything else you want to tell us about?" section at the end of their questionnaire to express their appreciation of the forum, their sadness and leaving their hope that there would be more similar forums in the future.

The sub-regional dialogue and UN event

Most respondents said that this was a success, impressing ministers and empowering and interesting the children.

The biggest concerns were over the way the dialogue was managed. Children expressed satisfaction that they were able to speak to the ministers and senior officials. However, they also complained that the ministers did not really respond to their questions. This concern was echoed by adult respondents. It was noted that during the meeting, adults (ministers, senior officials, guests and organizers) spoke far more than the children, a lot of which was not responding to children's questions. Also, the meeting was very formal. Partly this was due to the meeting room, about which the organizers had little choice. It was suggested that a more informal, child-friendly atmosphere might lead to a more interactive dialogue and send a stronger message that children have a right to be listened to with respect, even by senior government officials. There was also a warning that dialogues as such work only if the ministers and officials invited are in a position to influence anti-trafficking policy and programming.

Another concern was that children did not have enough time to prepare themselves, especially for their performances and the "marketplace". However, the overall response to the performances seemed to be very positive.

The facilitating team and the work of the interpreters in the sub-regional forum were widely praised. There were suggestions that the facilitators should be closer to the children in age, that there should be gender balance in the facilitation team, and that facilitators should have direct experience, or at least training, in facilitating children's activities. The idea of having a facilitator from each country was also considered very beneficial.

Several respondents noted that while adults gave children the chance to discuss and decide freely on the content of the sub-regional recommendations, the process itself was very adult-led and even restrictive; children should have had more of a role in planning, in deciding on the processes, in facilitating sessions, and in leading games. However, most children said that they had enough control in the sub-regional forum.

Children and adults both very frequently complained that the programme did not give children enough free time and made them work too much and for too long. Also, a lot of time and children's energy was taken up with listening to adults explaining processes and children trying to understand them, and in fact there was very little chance

Information for children

The organizers recognized the importance of children receiving enough information to make informed decisions and to participate meaningfully, in a format that was interesting and easy to understand.

Information

Written information, rules, presentations, logistics

Was it clear? Was it interesting? Was it useful? Was it enough?



Children had enough timely and appropriate information (information packs, technical input in the forum etc.) to participate meaningfully in the sub-regional children's forum.

Strongly agree: 7 *Agree: 10*
Disagree: 2 *Strongly disagree: 0*

Most children seemed to feel that the information they received was clear and interesting. However, there were a few comments that there was too much information or that it was sometimes boring; chaperones' comments suggested that this was a complaint voiced by younger participants. A partner commented that in the national children's forum, children with close links to participating organizations (usually based in the capital) received more information about the forum and earlier, whereas children who came from further away knew little about what was expected before they arrived at the forum. Similarly, the printed information for the sub-regional forum was translated and distributed to some children much earlier than to others, perhaps explaining why some felt they had too much to read at the forum itself. It was suggested that information be distributed earlier.

Finally, several adult respondents observed that lower-level forums were actually the best preparation for children and the best environments for them to deepen their understanding of the topics. It was suggested that if the Mekong Children's Forum process included rounds of organization-level, local and/or provincial children's forums, this would ensure the children were better prepared for national and sub-regional forums.

Child protection

With so many vulnerable children and victims of trafficking participating, the organizers' duty to protect the children was strongly emphasized in the guidelines and procedures. One facilitator was given the role of child protection officer, overseeing child protection and providing the first response.

Safety and adult support

Did you feel safe? Did you feel supported? Were your problems and complaints dealt with?



Clearly the children felt safe and supported when they were at the forum. Linked to this were comments about appreciating not having to do interviews.

Forms 2 and 3 asked adults whether they were aware of any problems encountered by children in the forum, and how these were dealt with. Many reported that children's workload was too heavy and that they did not have time for leisure. Apart from that, adults reported that problems had been dealt with very well. The child protection officer dealt with problems calmly and sympathetically. When a child became emotionally distressed during an interview with a journalist, the interview was terminated, the child was given counselling, and the organizers met promptly to discuss any necessary changes to policy and procedures.

Conclusions, learning and recommendations

12

There is every reason to think that, for the children and adults concerned, the Mekong Children's Forum was a valuable, educational and even enjoyable experience. It was publicized through the local and international media, and it is clear that the Government ministers and senior officials who came into contact with the children were impressed. Whether it makes a significant impact on anti-trafficking policies in the Greater Mekong Sub-region is too early to say. But it was clearly a step in the right direction. Children from every country asked for both national and sub-regional forums in the future, and these calls were echoed in the children's evaluations.

The partnership between the Save the Children UK and ILO teams worked extremely well, allowing more children to participate from more partner organizations, and to meet senior government figures. The cooperative attitude that both partners brought to the initiative has spilled over into follow-up planning and into other areas of work. At the national level, partnerships between these and other organizations seem also to have been very positive.

The rest of this chapter brings together the learning points and recommendations from the earlier chapters.

12.1. Learning and recommendations

Policies and guidelines

It became clear that detailed written guidelines, even backed up by the availability of verbal guidance by email or telephone, were not always enough to ensure that all staff and partners involved in organizing the forums were maintaining the desired ethical and practical standards. Some organizers of national forums complained that the *Preliminary Guidelines* were too long for them to read in the short time they had before their forums, or to translate and distribute to their partners.

The ethical and practical framework set out in the *Preliminary Guidelines* was approved by respondents in the evaluation, with a few exceptions on specific points that will be covered later. However, the presentation seems to have caused problems. Also, with written guidelines, there is no guarantee that they will be understood or

implemented in the same ways by readers in different countries.

What we learned:

- The *Preliminary Guidelines* should be reviewed and presented in a simpler, more user-friendly format;
- To complement written guidelines, national-level organizers and interested partners should be given training on facilitating children's participation and on how to implement the guidelines;
- Among other things, the training should cover how to ensure that all participants feel confident to participate equally, whatever their background, age or educational level, especially in dialogues with adults.

Seeking informed consent

Several national organizers complained that the model informed consent form was too complicated and possibly intimidating for parents and guardians, especially of the more vulnerable children. There was some question over the legal status of the consent form in different countries and what commitments ILO and Save the Children UK could make as organizations, which was never resolved.

While consent forms were completed for all of the children participating in the sub-regional forum, there was very little way of knowing how well the parents or guardians had understood it.

Because chaperones were responsible for two or more children who might live a great distance away, it was not always possible to arrange a meeting with children and parents/guardians before signing the consent forms.

What we learned:

- The procedures for obtaining parents'/guardians' consent should be reviewed to ensure they are appropriate and practical in the national context;
- The informed consent form should be revised to simplify it and to resolve legal/organizational issues;
- Training for national-level organizers and partners

should include how to seek informed consent from children and parents/guardians;

Selection of participants

Feedback from the evaluation indicated that many adults felt that too few former victims of trafficking took part in the Mekong Children's Forum, and that this made the children's advocacy less credible; although the policy of involving children who might not be vulnerable but who have experience of anti-trafficking work also had its defenders.

Children in the national forums naturally chose the most confident and articulate children who fitted their criteria as delegates to the Mekong Children's Forum. Vulnerable children and victims of trafficking tend to have a lower level of education sometimes poor self esteem. This probably explains why relatively few of the child delegates in the Mekong Children's Forum were in these groups.

Many former victims of trafficking do not return to their homes until they are over 18. They may have valuable experience but are excluded by the current guidelines, which say only under-18s can take part.

What we learned:

- The principle that children should be able to choose their own representatives is important, and should be kept. It should also be more actively followed in selecting participants for national forums;
- Ways should be found to include more victims of trafficking in sub-regional and national forums and in any preparatory processes. These could include working with organizations in destination countries that have contact with trafficking victims, and organizing separate forums for victims at organizational/local level;
- Organizers could consider relaxing the age restriction and allow over-18s to participate. Alternatively, more effort can be made to find meaningful roles for over-18s in preparing for and organizing the forums, as was suggested in the *Preliminary Guidelines*.

Information for children

Receiving information in advance of the forums undoubtedly helped to enrich the children's discussions. Where national-level organizers and partners supported local-level or organizational-level meetings and similar preparatory processes that allowed children to think through issues themselves, discuss them with their peers, and seek clarification from adults, it meant children came

to national forums more prepared and able to speak for a wider group of their peers.

Some adult presentations in the Mekong Children's Forum seemed unplanned and, as a result, were confusing and even self-contradictory. Talking to children in a way that they can understand is not always easy, especially when it is about "adult" topics like trafficking or the mechanics of a meeting.

A transparent and non-prescriptive approach to providing information seems to have helped to establish children's trust and make them feel more able to voice their own opinions. One unfortunate incident, when children were given a dishonest answer about why children from Myanmar were not present in the Mekong Children's Forum, demonstrated that it is not always easy to maintain transparency with children.

The information packs for children seem to have been read and understood by the majority of child participants, even those as young as age 10. However, some children thought there was too much information or that it was not all interesting for them. This was particularly true of children who received the information packs late and did not have any opportunity to discuss them with adults or their friends.

What we learned:

- Adult presentations, even very brief, during children's forums should be planned, clear and brief, and if possible adults should receive some training or support in how to present in a participatory, child-friendly way;
- Printed information supplied to children should be complemented by local-level or organizational-level meetings and learning activities to help children understand the key messages;
- Children's information needs – content and format/medium – should be reviewed, especially for younger children. Special attention should be paid to ensuring all children receive sufficient briefings.

Child protection

The importance of protecting children's privacy and control of information was not well understood by national forum organizers, with the result that the guidelines on, for example, media contact with children were not always taken into account in planning, especially around media events. At each national forum, a communication officer from Save the Children UK or ILO was present and tried to ensure children's rights were protected during media contact. However, they found it was virtually impossible to enforce the guidelines, especially when journalists had

been invited along with no prior mention of a ban on cameras or video equipment.

Children's paintings were distributed without children's interpretations or information about whether they had consented to it being used. The result was that paintings could not be widely exhibited or published and it was not clear what they were meant to show.

The debate over how, and to what extent, to restrict children's contact with the media, has been outlined. Journalists in the press conference at the Mekong Children's Forum asked children about their experiences of trafficking, but none of the children responded. It was suggested that this was because children had been "scared" by the briefings on media contact during the forum and that it limited the amount of coverage the forum received. On the other hand, several children indicated that they appreciated not having to be interviewed, and the forum did attract coverage in the local English-language and international media.

Some forum organizers saw the child protection guidelines as burdensome and restrictive, and did not fully implement them. They sometimes argued that, as things probably would not go wrong, it did not make sense to spend time and energy on precautions. It is strongly recommended that the existing child protection guidelines should be reviewed but not watered down, and instead national forum organizers should be given training and support on how to implement them. While the probability that major problems will occur may be small, their consequences could be very bad for the children concerned. Organizers must take all reasonable steps to minimize the risks and be ready to deal with problems effectively.

What we learned:

- Training for forum organizers on facilitating children's participation must cover the many good reasons for strict child protection measures, including protecting children's privacy and obtaining their informed consent for use of artwork etc;
- Arrangements for media contact with child participants should be reviewed, perhaps with the help of children and local journalists;
- Information on the roles and responsibilities of facilitators, chaperones and interpreters should be distributed in a more structured and logical way. A meeting should be held for chaperones and interpreters at the start of the forum to clarify their responsibilities and what is expected of them.

Media and advocacy

A comprehensive and well-planned media strategy undoubtedly helped to ensure the Mekong Children's Forum was reasonably well publicized in the English-language and international media. However, coverage of the Mekong Children's Forum and of the national forums was more variable in the local-language media. Sometimes this was down to poor timing (for example, scheduling press events to clash with other newsworthy events or at times when journalists are usually busy) or poor advance communication with media; in others, it was undoubtedly because local media simply had different priorities.

The forum video was a compelling way to introduce the initiative that could be shared easily in VCD format. It was also appreciated by children who watched it during the Mekong Children's Forum.

The presence of the *Bangkok Post* reporter during the Mekong Children's Forum led to an interesting and insightful article being published in a widely read newspaper. No children complained about his presence. However, it was necessary for organizers to monitor him and organize interviews outside the normal forum sessions.

While the Internet offers good opportunities for children in different cities and countries to communicate especially when they have assistance with typing, Internet access and translation, the online forum has not been used. More communication and training with partner organizations and with children was almost certainly needed.

What we learned:

- More careful planning is needed to ensure sub-regional forums receive adequate (and appropriate) coverage in the local-language media in participating countries; National organizers may need training or more active support from the sub-regional level to ensure local reporters are aware of the event, especially if the sub-regional forum is located elsewhere;
- Inviting an "embedded" journalist should be considered for future forums. However, one journalist should be the maximum to avoid disruption;
- The forum video idea should also be repeated in future forums and pre-filming some of the participating children in a controlled environment (only by organizers and in accordance with protection Guidelines) should be considered for hand-out material to television journalists that require personal stories.

The national forums

The national forums, and the preparations for them, took on very different characters. Although the forum organizers were, in theory at least, following a single set of guidelines, they were given considerable freedom to implement the forums as they saw best. Different situations in the countries and the country programmes, different levels of capacity, different partners and different understandings of the *Preliminary Guidelines* (if they were read), ensured that the experiences were very different. On the whole this was probably a good thing, although there were some concerns over whether children were adequately protected and whether the right children were included in the forums.

Nearly all the adult respondents in the evaluation described their workload for the forums as heavy. At the national level, some teams were clearly overwhelmed.

What we learned:

- Some evaluation respondents suggested that in future, they should be able to assign one staff member who would be responsible only for forum organization for a period.
- National processes should start earlier and, where possible, include more partners and children – not necessarily more children taking part in national forums, but participants should be selected from a wider group of children, all of whom have opportunities to discuss the forums and put forward their ideas and suggestions.

The Mekong Children's Forum

The feedback from adults and children give a strong impression that the Mekong Children's Forum was both valuable and enjoyable, even if it involved hard work. Clearly some things could have been done better, but overall it was a highly successful event.

The number of interpreters seems to have been adequate to allow children to follow and contribute to forum discussions, especially with the help of the facilitators from each country. The interpreters themselves were dedicated and did a good job with a professional attitude. One small concern was that at the end of the forum sessions the interpreters were too tired to continue interpreting, so children could not always communicate with their new friends.

There was a good level of transparency and very little interference by adults in children's free discussions and decision-making. However, children were not much involved in planning and facilitating the Mekong Children's

Forum – certainly, they had been much more involved in these during some national forums.

A large, multi-lingual facilitating team was undoubtedly a major asset in the forum. There was a good mix of games, which children clearly enjoyed. However, some facilitators felt that they were not experienced enough in facilitating for children, and that perhaps they should have been closer to the children's age.

The dialogue with ministers and senior officials clearly made an impression on both the adults and the children involved. However, the fact is that, even though it over-ran by more than 30 minutes, children spoke very little, and there was not much real "dialogue" between adults and children. A lot of time was spent on formal introductions and speeches.

The closing party was a well-organized and much-appreciated opportunity for the children to celebrate their achievements and relax with their new-found friends. This should always be included in forum programmes.

What we learned:

- Facilitators should be provided with training in how to facilitate for children. This could be a role for young adults with experience of trafficking and/or anti-trafficking work;
- Much greater priority should be placed on ending forum sessions at or near the scheduled time. Children should never have to work late into the evening;
- Children should be more actively involved in planning and facilitating forum sessions;
- Thought should be given to management of dialogues between children and senior officials. They should be made more child friendly, informal and interactive. This could include having children chairing the sessions. Also, equal emphasis should be placed on adults questioning children.

ANNEXES

- Annex I:** Code of Conduct for Adults in the Mekong Children's Forum
- Annex II:** Children's Agendas for Action from national, provincial and other forums
- Annex III:** The Mekong Children's Recommendations on Human Trafficking
- Annex IV:** Bibliography of materials consulted in drafting the Preliminary Guidelines
- Annex V:** Brochure introducing the Voices of Children initiative
- Annex VI:** Children's information packs for the Mekong Children's Forum
- Annex VII:** Preliminary Guidelines for Organizing Human Trafficking –
Voices of Children National Forums
- Annex VIII:** Responsibilities and Code of Conduct for Chaperones/Interpreters
- Annex IX:** Parents'/Guardians' informed consent form
for the Mekong Children's Forum
- Annex X:** Information for seeking informed consent for children's participation
in the Mekong Children's Forum
- Annex XI:** Evaluation forms for adults and children

“We want to see results. We want governments to take serious action against trafficking. We will follow up and examine the activities of governments.”

The Mekong Children’s Recommendations on Human Trafficking

The Mekong Children’s Forum on Human Trafficking (MCF) was sponsored by ILO-IPEC’s Mekong Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women, and Save the Children UK. The MCF was the culmination of a series of national and provincial children’s forums held in Cambodia, China (Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces), Lao PDR, Thailand (Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Phayao Provinces), and Viet Nam.

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