HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

FAAE • NUMBER 057 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, April 28, 2015

Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Okay, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we'll resume our study of the protection of children and youth in developing countries.

I want to recognize our witnesses and thank them for taking the time to be here to talk about this very important topic. I'll start introducing you very quickly and then go to opening comments.

From Cuso International, we have Kieran Breen, the director of international programs. Welcome, and we're glad to have you here. We also have Astrid Bucio, the program development and funding officer. Welcome to you as well.

Next, we have David Stevenson, the managing director of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, not to be confused with the Warren Buffett foundation. We are looking forward to hearing all about what you're up to.

Then, joining us from the Canadian Red Cross, we have Patricia Strong, the senior manager of program development, international operations. We realize that Conrad Sauvé was going to be here today, but with what's going on with the earthquake in Nepal, we can certainly understand why he's not here. You guys play an important role. We just send our best to him as well, as you move through that.

And joining us via video conference from Washington, from the International Center for Research on Women, we have Sarah Degnan Kambou, the president. We welcome you.

We're going to start on my left-hand side with Mr. Breen, who's going to give us his opening comments. We'll move across the row, then we'll move to our video conference and Dr. Kambou. Then after we've had all of our opening statements, we'll go back and forth over the next couple of hours, following up with some questions and the like.

Mr. Breen, welcome. We're glad to have you here. We'll turn it over to you now.

Mr. Kieran Breen (Director, International Programs, Cuso International): Thank you for setting up this inquiry and for inviting Cuso International to be present. We welcome the opportunity to acknowledge the effort and achievements of the Canadian government in safeguarding children and young people. We greatly appreciate the global leadership of the Canadian government, which it has been showing in relation to MNCH, gender equality, and child and youth issues.

Cuso International is a Canadian development agency that has over 50 years' experience working in inclusive partnerships to eradicate poverty through equitable and sustainable development. Every year we recruit, on average, 250 skilled Canadian professionals, such as managers, business development experts, midwives, and community workers, and place them with our partner agencies. Last year we worked in 27 countries, supporting 167 partners, and reaching one million beneficiaries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

As previous presentations to this committee have already shown, whilst progress on the MDGs has been made, it is still sadly the fact that 800 women die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, that teenage pregnancy is on the increase, and a child dies every 27 seconds from mainly preventable diseases.

Prioritizing investment in MNCH is vital to ensuring and safeguarding the rights of mothers, babies, and children. Through our work with Canadian partners, such as the Canadian Midwives Association in Ethiopia and Tanzania, we have learned that along with financial reasons and distance to facilities, the attitude of health providers, especially toward women from poor communities, can be a major barrier to accessing care. Canadian volunteer midwives are well-placed to promote and share respectful care standards with their counterparts alongside clinical expertise.

Cuso International's work at the community level has also confirmed that raising awareness of community groups—for example, men becoming involved in parenting and being capable of identifying complications and seeking medical attention for their pregnant wives—can have a great impact. Equally important is addressing gender inequalities that give men, in too many countries, full decision-making power over family health matters.

Another important step to ensuring that the rights of children and youth are recognized is ensuring that all children are registered at birth. Without birth registration children are invisible and cannot enrol in school, are more vulnerable to abuse, child marriage, child labour, sexual exploitation. Cuso has pioneered work in Tanzania to increase the spread of birth registration by raising the importance of registration with parents and using mobile-phone technology to aid the process. We commend the decision of the Canadian government to support the scaling-up of birth registration. It is important to mention that most countries in Africa have not progressed much in reforming their civil registration and vital statistics systems, and this is a critical development issue to which Canada has much to offer.

Central to Cuso's approach to working with children and young people is a firm commitment to the rights of children and young people. We see children and young people as active participants and agents of change and not simply consumers of services. Across the youth projects that Cuso supports in countries such as Nigeria, Benin, Peru, Bolivia and Myanmar, we actively work with our partners to put children and young people at the centre of service development and to support and encourage adult decision-makers to listen to and respect their voices.

The ILO states that 73 million young women and men across the world are without work. This unemployment phenomenon can also be linked to the growth of gang cultures and the rise of violent lifestyles, especially for young men. This is why in countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, Jamaica, Nigeria, Peru, and Bolivia we are implementing youth projects addressing poverty, social exclusion, and lack of opportunity. These initiatives have a strong emphasis on employment and business development and, increasingly, we are seeking to link these initiatives to impact investment opportunities.

It is worth stating the obvious, that the sense of achievement and pride that comes from young women and men starting their own business often transfers into other areas of their life and might, for example, lead to a young woman being better able to negotiate when she will get married and have children, and how many children she will have. It is also the case that young people who see economic opportunities before them are less likely to be attracted to gangs and criminal activity.

Cuso International delivers its programming through placing skilled volunteers from a variety of backgrounds with partner agencies. These highly skilled volunteers provide much-needed and cost-effective technical assistance. Recognizing that the Canadian expertise is rich and diverse, Cuso International has diverse mechanisms to channel professional volunteerism which includes e-volunteering, diaspora and corporate volunteering.

With respect to corporate volunteering, Cuso International's experience is that it is an effective and cost-effective way for the Canadian private sector to share much-needed expertise, skills and experiences, and has the added benefit of enabling them to further develop their learning and understanding of the people, contexts and cultures .

● (1110)

Our recommendations for the committee are as follows.

First, Canada should seek to ensure that the voices of girls, boys, young men, and young women are ever present in all decision-making about children and young people, and should support innovative practice that seeks to empower and give a voice to children and young people.

Second, Canada should continue to support the critical and cost-effective role of volunteers, or of organizations that deliver assistance through skilled volunteers, in the delivery of Canadian development aid, and should explore how new models of volunteerism can expand the opportunities for Canadians to contribute to global efforts to put an end to poverty and improve safeguards and protection of children and young people.

Third, Canada should recognize the value of inclusive partnerships and build on experiences that civil society organizations have gained through working directly with communities at the centre of development programs.

In conclusion, Cuso International wants to commend the Canadian government for its leadership in the call for global action to end the preventable deaths of mothers, newborns, and children, and its commitment to advancing child and youth rights.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Breen for taking that in under your seven minutes. That's very good. It's not always done, but good for you.

Thank you very much.

We're going to turn it over Mr. Stevenson.

Sir, seven minutes, please. Thanks.

Mr. David Stevenson (Managing Director, Howard G. Buffett Foundation, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the committee for inviting me here.

I'm going to speak from personal experience for a few reasons. First, because I feel right at home here in Ottawa and in Canada. Second, I'm not actually representing the foundation here today, though I will explain a little of what I'm doing and what the foundation is doing. Third, I think it can be potentially more interesting to the committee if I give some personal anecdotes and some personal experience from my time in the field in the subject matter. Lastly, of course, it's just more fun that way to prepare and to engage.

I want to congratulate you as a committee for spending some time on the situation of children and youth in the world, particularly on the role that Canada can play in protection of children and youth.

I think Canadians believe that youth and children should have a chance to reach their full potential. I think this is one of the many core beliefs that we share. Sometimes out there in the world, I think our Canadian beliefs, our belief system, could be expressed better to others with a more focused approach and results through action. I think the way Canada has shown leadership and focus in children and youth is fabulously helpful in that way. I'm a very proud Canadian in this way, in fact, in every way.

I just came back from Africa where I have spent most of my time since I started to work with Howard Buffett in November. I did not intend to start this presentation talking about the news coming out of North Africa and the Mediterranean, the news of capsized boats, and the tragic drowning of migrants trying to get into Europe and beyond. But seeing groups of migrants at the Brussels airport reminded me again that where children and youth are threatened most is where local living conditions are the worst, and that's where chaotic and now often tragic migration originates.

Many are now saying that a solutions approach to migration, to protection issues more generally, must look at root causes, and they are right. It must be an integrated and coherent approach. Child protection is an important lens to focus development, foreign policy, and even trade priorities, and your amalgamated department should be more effective if it works coherently and together.

But I want to make a clear point here that policy dialogue and articulation of what should be done is important, but vulnerable children and youth do not substantively benefit from it. Obviously, they only benefit when the dialogue, the policy, the external engagement, such as our discussion today, leads to action by leaders, by community leaders, including parents, to make things better for them. In that way, advancing Canadian policy can be more effective by further empowering embassies abroad supporting Canadian beliefs in your countries of focus and through multilateral partners and NGOs working towards local solutions.

Fortunately, there are many Canadians out there who get results through action, who walk the talk, and Canada has a good results-based and accountability agenda that promotes action where it matters. From here in Ottawa we should always ask what good we are doing with the resources we spend where they are needed most.

Here's a country example. Howard and I are doing a lot in and for Rwanda these days. It is a country I know well, having worked there among the war and genocide in 1994 and 1995 as a humanitarian official and as a WFP country representative from 2000 to 2004. Now, one can talk about their experience in Rwanda and the region in many ways, but let me just say that the situation for children and youth has improved. The image I have now is of children swimming and playing in the rivers and schoolyards there, because that is what I'm seeing. Not long ago it wasn't like that. What a remarkable transition. They now talk of reaching middle income status. You can see development in Rwanda in the kids' faces and in the infrastructure that supports opportunities to grow.

Stability, growth, and good governance go a long way in reducing child trafficking, child soldiers, child sex workers, and net migration. The groups of migrants I saw the other day in Brussels were not from Rwanda.

● (1115)

The transition from an emergency to development in Rwanda was hugely aided by Canadian support. Furthermore, the World Food Programme, the agency where I worked for 18 years, was the largest multilateral contributor in the humanitarian relief stage. Right from the start we worked to contribute to solutions. It is truly remarkable that Rwanda is now food self-sufficient. .

Other agencies were part of the team approach. Country leadership always mattered and country capacity was supported. In fact, Rwandans would accept nothing less.

Canada, as the second largest donor to the WFP, traditionally and through support for a multilateral presence there in many other ways, has helped make this happen. Because of this positive change, Howard and I are working with Rwandans on a big idea for modernized, sustainable, agricultural growth. It's about making very low-income, small-scale farmers more productive through investments in modernizing agriculture. Improving nutrition will be a key success. This will contribute an example of change driven by action which will generate growth and thereby increase opportunities for children and youth. I believe it will help further stabilize conditions for child protection.

Let me focus now on nutrition, an area where Canada's leadership in the world gets results. I can say from deep personal experience that malnutrition is a child protection issue. Malnourished children are vulnerable children. They are children in need of protection. Thankfully, when it comes to malnutrition, many of the solutions are well known to us, and there are many actors globally who are making a difference. I sit on the board of directors of one of the best, the Micronutrient Initiative, based right here in Ottawa, Canada. The Micronutrient Initiative has a Canadian postal code and a global reputation for excellence, reach, and impact in combatting malnutrition.

One of my recommendations for the committee is for Canada to continue to support the MI and to be vocal about and proud of that support. At every opportunity Canada should encourage other donors to support MI, so it moves toward being a global institution based in Canada and increases its impact in that way.

Another board where I am engaged is at the the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It is a Swiss registered NGO based in Geneva with status as a global institution and with a progressively inclusive governance model which was set up to include donors, implementing governments, private sector representatives, NGOs, and also people representing communities themselves, people affected or infected by the three diseases. It's a model that works quite well. One of the ways it does so is by ensuring rights based protection issues are given their due in dialogue, policy agreements, and country programs.

For example, one of the challenges we are now working on is a new strategy for adolescent girls in east and southern Africa where AIDS prevalence is highest. The region contains 53% of the people in the world living with HIV and a total of 5% of the world's population.

I was posted as a WFP representative in Zambia for four years where it seemed that the biggest growth industry was funeral parlours. In this region of Africa, young women aged 15 to 24 account for one in three new HIV infections. There are some 6,000 new infections every week even now. So HIV prevention, including innovative approaches that get at the root causes, is urgent.

Girls get infected largely for economic reasons. We know that from cash transfer studies in the region. We have studies that show that cash transfers to adolescent girls, as part of social protection schemes, reduce prevalence rates dramatically. Put simply, girls are much less likely to have sex and get infected with a payment of $25 a month or less.

I am not here to advocate for funding such a scheme through the global fund. In fact they are not yet at that stage in administrative planning, but I will say that I do not think any more young girls should be infected with HIV through sex when there are alternative ways of addressing the economic root cause.

● (1120)

These are my personal reflections. Thank you again for the invitation to speak here.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Stevenson.

We're now going to turn it over to Patricia Strong, who has the floor.

Ms. Patricia Strong (Senior Manager, Program Development, International Operations, Canadian Red Cross): Good morning. Bonjour.

Honourable members, thank you very much for providing the Canadian Red Cross with an opportunity to address the committee today. My name is Patricia Strong and I lead the development of our programs in maternal, newborn, and child health. Our secretary general, Conrad Sauvé, also wished to convey his appreciation for allowing us this opportunity, and he regrets he could not be with all of us today. The evolving tragedy in Nepal requires his attention this morning.

Today I would like to focus on maternal, newborn, and child health, and to emphasize that the protection of children and youth must also mean addressing those threats to their health and very survival. I would also like us to recognize that together, as a global community, we can accomplish great results.

Our investment in maternal, newborn, and child health has been enormously successful, and as the world embarks on the era of sustainable development goals, we can face the next 15 years with great optimism about what we can achieve. As together we think about what can be accomplished in this new era, I would also like to focus on the important challenges ahead and the contributions that we believe the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement can bring to these challenges.

Since the world came together to establish the MDGs 15 years ago, tremendous progress has been made. The lives of 3.3 million children have been saved because of our progress in malaria alone. Millions of women and children have survived because of the efforts of the global community, and the commitment of the Canadian government in particular. Saving these lives has been the ultimate form of child protection. We can continue to achieve great progress for all women and children if we renew our efforts and genuinely commit to the sustainable goal target of ending preventable maternal and child deaths before 2030.

More than half of all maternal and child deaths occur in countries affected by disaster, conflict, and fragility in some of the most remote and troubled regions of the world. We cannot achieve the SDGs unless we make a sustained and determined effort to reach these mothers and children with life saving MNCH services. It is in these hard-to-reach and dangerous contexts that women and children face the greatest threats to their lives, to their health, and to their survival with dignity. Even now, as we respond to the tragedy in Nepal, we have great concerns for mothers and children, who often suffer the most during crises. We have seen that during disasters and conflict the greatest health impacts are often from the chronic lack of access to basic health care services as health systems collapse or are unable to cope.

For example, in Syria the collapse of the health system has disproportionately impacted on women and children, who continue to bear the brunt of the Syrian crisis. The crisis has contributed to the resurgence of diseases that we thought were eradicated, such as polio, and children have no access to treatment for pneumonia or diarrhea.

The health and nutrition status of women and children who have survived is also grave. We know that rates of sexual violence increase in disaster and conflict situations. Through our work we witness the devastating consequences of sexual violence on individuals, families, and communities. In emergency situations, sexual violence is deeply linked to other patterns of violence. It is never acceptable, and during times of conflict sexual violence is prohibited under international law.

We believe that in order to address these pressing MNCH issues and significantly improve the health outcomes for mothers and their children, we must reach the most remote and volatile areas, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile states, where health indicators are the worst and access is the most difficult. It is only then that we will see true progress towards our global goal of ending preventable maternal and child deaths by 2030.

As an organization dedicated to lifesaving assistance in populations affected by crises, the Canadian Red Cross has delivered essential health services for a century, and internationally for more than 50 years. In the past 10 years alone we have supported vital health programming throughout disasters and conflicts in 39 of the world's 50 most fragile states, either directly or in partnership with other members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Currently we have bilateral programming in seven fragile states, and proposals in the pipeline to extend our programming to Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, and Ethiopia. In all our MNCH work we're committed to achieving or exceeding global standards, and we measure our progress against indicators established by the UN Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health.

In addition to addressing pressing MNCH needs, the Canadian Red Cross has been committed to child protection programming for 30 years. We work with local communities to find local solutions to violence against children. All of our MNCH programs include training for staff and volunteers in violence prevention, including child protection.

● (1125)

I would like to turn our attention for a moment to the global focus on innovation. The Canadian Red Cross and partners know that new ideas and technologies can save lives. We believe that innovation is a critical element of achieving our collective hope to end preventable maternal and child deaths.

Our focus on innovation must be accompanied with the means to take life-saving interventions to scale, even in the world's most challenging contexts. Only then will we be able to eradicate deadly childhood diseases and achieve greater equity in health to ensure that all women and children have access to critical health care services.

We recognize, however, that there are many challenges in taking innovations to scale, including sustained delivery to the millions of women and children who need these interventions the most. We believe our global family can help address these challenges.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has a permanent presence in 189 countries, and we have 17 million active and trained volunteers worldwide. This provides us with essential local knowledge and access to the most remote communities. It also provides us with an unprecedented reach.

Our movement has supported the vaccination of more than one billion children worldwide. The Canadian Red Cross and partners, with the support of the Canadian government, have distributed seven million insecticide-treated nets to combat malaria, reaching more than 10 million women and children in Africa alone.

Finally, we believe that local capacities and partnerships are essential to maternal and child protection and survival in fragile and conflict-affected states. Through our work, we have also learned about the importance of strengthened and resilient health systems in communities and of working with and building the capacity of local partners, especially during times of disaster, conflict, and fragility.

Where government structures may be limited or completely absent, relying on local actors is essential to gaining access to and acceptance by local communities. In Syria, we worked to strengthen the capacity of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent prior to the conflict. This strength has enabled them to continue functioning throughout the crisis. They have an unparalleled reach throughout Syria, delivering emergency and primary health care services in the most marginalized areas.

In Liberia, as the Ebola crisis overwhelmed the health system, health workers and volunteers in our Red Cross program continue to deliver MNCH services to thousands of mothers and children at the community level, including no-touch treatments for malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia.

In closing, I would like to remind us that on this day more than 500 mothers and 18,000 children will die needlessly from preventable diseases and conditions. More than half of these mothers and children will die in countries affected by disaster, conflict, and fragility. We ask you to think of these women and children in Syria, in Nepal, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in those too many countries where disaster, conflict, and instability persist.

Yet there is hope. Let us work together, not only for the survival of these women and children, but to ensure that they thrive to full and healthy lives with dignity, and that we commit to the health and quality of life for all women and children, no matter the circumstances to which they have been born.

In closing, the Canadian Red Cross would like to thank the honourable committee members once again for giving us a chance to share our perspective on these critical issues. We welcome the Government of Canada's continued commitment to MNCH, and we look forward to Canada's continued global contribution to the health of women and children.

Thank you very much.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Strong.

We're now going to go via video conference to Washington and Dr. Kambou.

The floor is yours.

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou (President, International Center for Research on Women): Thank you very much.

Honourable members of Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today as you consider the important topic of child, early, and forced marriage, and the role Canada can play to end this harmful practice.

I serve as the president of the International Center for Research on Women, a global research institute that provides research evidence to inform programs and policies to alleviate poverty, promote gender equality, and empower women and girls.

One of the most persistent challenges we face in achieving our mission is the practice of child marriage, a practice we have been working to end for nearly two decades.

It is a privilege to be here with you today to discuss what we have learned through our research and action you may wish to consider.

Child, early, and forced marriage includes any legal or customary union involving a boy or girl below the age of 18, or any marriage without the free and full consent of both spouses.

Today I will focus on child marriage, which is by definition forced marriage. Child marriage is first and foremost a violation of human rights. The free and full consent to marry is closely connected to the right to life, to the highest attainable standard of health, to education, to bodily integrity, and to freedom from violence and exploitation.

When a girl is forced to marry, she may face serious health complications, even death, from early pregnancy and early and repeated childbearing. She is often at higher risk for HIV infection and intimate partner violence. She is often isolated, taken away from her family, school, and peers, and given little to no opportunity to participate in community life.

Child marriage is not an isolated phenomenon. Despite the fact that 18 is the minimum legal age of marriage in some 158 countries, girls under the age of 18, and even under 15 in many countries, can marry due to state or customary law, or with the consent of parents or authorities.

Child marriage is a worldwide problem that crosses cultures, religions, and geographies. One in three girls in the developing world is married before the age of 18. One in nine is married before the age of 15. Each year some 15 million girls are married. That's 39,000 girls each day, or one every two seconds.

Why is child marriage widespread and persistent? While different traditions and socioeconomic circumstances perpetuate the practice in different contexts, child marriage tends to be more prevalent in poor and rural communities and households, and in countries and communities where women and girls have limited educational and economic opportunities. A poor family may be more compelled to marry their daughter early, whether to gain bride price from a groom's family, to minimize the cost of the dowry, or simply to reduce the financial burden of an additional member of the household.

In many societies women's primary role is seen as reproductive. A girl's value is measured by the children she will have and the domestic labour she will provide to a future husband and in-laws. Families have less incentive to invest in her education, particularly when resources are scarce.

Laws and policies that govern birth registration, marriage registration, property rights, education, and health may be key variables in regards to the practice of child marriage.

This is an overview of the problem. Happily there are solutions that have been tested that I would like to present to you now.

Never before has there been so much attention and political will to act on this critically important issue. Here is how we begin.

Our research has identified five strategies that have been used successfully to delay girls' marriages in different contexts.

First and foremost, we must empower girls with information, skills, and support networks so they can gain access to the skills and confidence to be able to make and act on decisions, and so that they have peers who can support them.

● (1135)

Second, we can educate and engage parents and community members. In many societies it is families and community leaders who decide when and whom a girl marries. Educating these stakeholders about how child marriage affects a girl's health and future, and engaging them in creating change, can lead to powerful and positive outcomes.

Third, we must ensure girls' access to high-quality education. Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry as those with secondary or higher education. When girls are in school, they are less likely to be seen as ready for marriage, and they can develop supportive social networks and the skills to advocate for their needs. Incentives such as free uniforms and scholarships, programs that improve the safety and girl-friendliness of schools, and curricula that are relevant to girls' lives can help girls enrol and, most importantly, stay in school.

A fourth strategy is economic support. Providing a girl or her family with a loan, cash transfer, or an opportunity to learn an income-generating skill can yield immediate relief for struggling households, and can help girls be seen as bringing value to the family.

Finally, ensuring that child marriage prevention laws and policies are instituted and, importantly, implemented is a critical first step in ending the practice.

We thank Canada for its leadership in calling for action at a global level to end child marriage. Canada's engagement helped to ensure the passage of the UN General Assembly's first ever resolution on child marriage and will, hopefully, lead to the inclusion of child marriage prevention in the adoption of the SDGs this fall.

We encourage you to continue to stand strong for girls' rights at the international level, but investments in community level solutions are also critical. I know Canada is investing in this issue through UNICEF as well as through your bilateral development assistance.

To make a meaningful impact, we must work to protect girls' rights and empower them to make their own decisions about if, when, and whom to marry, as well as if, when, and with whom to have sex and bear children.

Progress for women and girls—measured by an end to child marriage and other forms of violence, by the improved sexual and reproductive health of women and girls, by increased educational and employment opportunities, and by the active participation and leadership of women in public life—should be metrics of success. We have abundant evidence that harmful practices can and do change, even those enshrined in culture.

I look forward to Canada's continued global engagement in ensuring that more than 150 million girls will not become child brides over the next decade, but will instead fulfill their potential as healthy and empowered citizens of the world.

Thank you.

● (1140)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Kambou.

We're going to start our first round, which will be seven minutes for questions and answers. I'm going to start over on my left with Madame Laverdière for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for their very interesting presentations. They have common themes, themes we have heard about during this study.

My first question is for the Cuso representative.

You often mentioned the word “partnership”, which is absolutely essential. You work in several countries where the situation is very difficult. I would like to know what difficulties the civil society faces in many of these countries and what could Canada do to help to improve the situation.

[*English*]

Mr. Kieran Breen: In relation to this topic, I think the challenges around partnership is to find agencies that are committed to bringing about change. I think some of the other speakers have spoken about it. It's one thing having a policy; it's another thing having people who are committed to bringing about change. I spent a long time working in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. I've worked in Asia as well. I suspect it's one of those sad truths of development that you often get to the capital city of a developing country and everybody is quite bright and committed, and the further away you get from that, there's a breakdown in reach and scale.

We always try to target poor and excluded communities. I was being honest with you. A challenge is finding partners who are committed to working with us in those poor areas. So it's relatively easy, say, in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to find big strong organizations that want to speak out on maternal health. If you go to Kagera or Mtwara, which are more rural areas, that becomes an issue both in terms of capacity and the fact that in countries that are very poor and disadvantaged, people don't want to live in those poor areas. So the smart people move to Dar es Salaam. Sadly a lot of the health professionals in Tanzania end up in London.

I think these are the kinds of challenges around our partnerships. I think one of the strengths of the volunteer approach is that we have the time to build partnerships. So for example when I worked for Save the Children, we would turn up and put money in and we would go away and come back, etc. I think by having skilled professional Canadians who can spend two years in a village in a rural setting, that gives us an opportunity to get to know the local players, to build those relationships, to understand the cultural context, the political context, and to build those partnerships.

I could bore you with examples of all the various processes we go through. That's really the challenge for me, finding partners you can work with who share that commitment.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: As you know, I have known Cuso for a very long time. I was even vaguely associated with the organization a few years ago. I admire what you are doing, but I also know that sometimes there are problems with the work of volunteers. We sometimes hear people talk about “voluntourism”, rather than volunteer cooperation.

You spoke about people — and I have first-hand knowledge of this — who spend two years in a village or small town, but at the same time, there are others who sometimes think they will get instant results. They go and spend a month in an African village.

How do you deal with that? What is your approach for handling this potential challenge of the work of volunteers?

[*English*]

Mr. Kieran Breen: I would hope it's based on the fact we have over 50 years' experience as a professional volunteering agency and that the heart of what we do is reducing poverty and inequality. I think it is the fact that there has been a growth of what I would call gap year, summer vacations, with 18-year-olds going out to do their bit. We can debate the strengths and weaknesses of that. I'm sure the young people get something out of it. I think the average age of a Cuso volunteer is something like 43 or 44. We have fairly intensive selection criteria and processes. We feel we're skilled at picking up on if somebody wants to go on holiday or somebody is a committed professional. We do a lot of pre-departure training to ensure that people understand the context and through that process, if we become alarmed or concerned about somebody's attitude, we have a weeding out process.

I think the other thing is in the countries where we work, it's about having committed partnerships. I lived in Costa Rica about a year ago when I was supporting my programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. I remember coming across a school in Costa Rica. I think there was 15 American volunteers on a gap year program. They had nothing to do. They had all paid a huge amount of money. I think it's quite easy to distinguish between those kind of, give us $5,000 to build a latrine and a school and a thought-through professional development program with highly skilled people sharing their skills in thought-through programs. I think it's about partnership. It's about professionalism. It's about selection criteria. At the heart of it all is that commitment to reducing poverty and inequality. It's the overriding mission of the organization.

● (1145)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I must point out that I was in no way questioning what you do. This is a subject that is often debated, and I wanted to take the opportunity of having you here to get your expertise on that important issue.

Mr. Chair, do I have time for a short question?

[*English*]

Do I have 30 seconds?

[*Translation*]

My question is for Ms. Degnan Kambou.

You spoke about sustainable development goals. In the current climate, do you think current objectives sufficiently meet the needs of girls in particular? I don't know if my question is clear.

[*English*]

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: Thank you very much, Madame Laverdière, for your question.

To this point, we are very encouraged by the formulation of the sustainable development goals, mostly particularly those indicators that focus on preventing child marriage and addressing preventable death, which we referred to earlier this morning.

However, we would like to see an increased focus particularly on adolescent girls, because we feel that they are most vulnerable. Quite often, as we are looking at development programming, because they are neither women of reproductive age nor children under five nor are they in school, they are very likely invisible to governments and special programs that are there to protect their welfare, promote their rights, and ensure their success as adults.

I'll stop there, but I thank you for the question and for allowing me to underscore that important issue.

The Chair: Thank you for the quick response as well. I appreciate that.

We're going to move over to Mr. Hawn.

Go ahead, sir, for seven minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you all for being here.

I want to mention that I see that my partner here, my colleague across the way, is participating as well. In the interests of bringing attention to malnutrition and poverty, I'm taking the Live Below the Line challenge this week, and this delicious-looking stew represents the biggest part of my $1.75 budget for today. I'm willing to share it with anybody.

I'd like to start with Dr. Kambou, if I may. In the area of combatting or eliminating child early or forced marriage and so on, as you mentioned there are legislative and enforcement initiatives and there's also education, which is key, but when we're talking about education, how do you address the challenge of educating against the resistance of societal norms and religious practices?

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: Let me start by referring to points that were raised by other members of the panel. It is important to work deep in communities and to actually be very grounded in order to understand the local culture, the customary practice, and the political landscape within communities and to understand, within that setting, how child marriage is perceived and where there may be advocates for changing the practice of child marriage. So we work within communities to educate broadly on the risks and the costs of child marriage.

We've seen very successful programs, such as Tostan in Senegal, and those in other countries of West Africa, whereby through working within communities there is a convergence and a consensus that the community as a whole wishes to end the practice. That's one approach and that would be the development approach.

I think for longer-term sustainable change we need to look at upstream solutions. So I would go back to the education sector and look at how we begin to work with children earlier in school to help them understand that gender is a learned social behaviour, a social role, and to help them understand that we can unlearn what we've been taught about it and about how we value women and girls, and we can adopt new healthy behaviours moving forward.

We've seen this be very successful in middle schools, for example, in India, where over the course of a two-year educational program, young middle-school boys and girls are adopting new norms. Of course, practising those norms and behaviours is something that moves into the future and needs continued support.

But to get outside of that broader social policy legislation, through solutions I outlined, such as conditional cash transfers, I think we'll have to tackle basic social change.

● (1150)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: So it's really going to be the parents and the children themselves who will probably lead this and drag the societal dinosaurs along with them.

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: Yes.

Quite frankly, that's why I loved the first question about the importance of focusing on adolescent girls and what was said by another panellist about the importance of voice. Adolescent girls know what their needs are. If they're given an opportunity to speak on their own behalf, they know what the solutions are within their immediate environment. This is a really important platform.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you.

I want to switch to the Canadian Red Cross for a second. It's partly in relation to what's happening in Nepal right now, and the things you mentioned about sexual violence in times of emergencies and so on.

What kind of child protection systems are under way at the moment in Nepal?

I know you can't say this with any definition at the moment, but what kind of things might you expect to learn from this experience, and how can we make those stronger?

Ms. Patricia Strong: Thank you very much for the question. It is early hours.

We are deploying an emergency response field hospital. All of our people who are part of that have been trained in child protection. That's a key and important fact. We're deploying people who understand the issues about child protection and how to watch for those issues in this particularly complex context. We know that there are thousands of children who are living on the streets as well in Kathmandu, so we're very concerned about them.

The issues are unfortunately pervasive and familiar to us because of our work in disasters and conflicts. One of the huge issues is the separation of children from their parents. One of the priorities during a disaster is to work with the local national society with the International Committee of the Red Cross to ensure family reunification. It is a critical activity that really promotes child protection for the populations where we work.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I was fortunate to be in Tanzania last year to see some of the great work that Canada was doing in micro-nutrition and so on. It's quite inspiring.

For Cuso, Mr. Breen, the issue of data collection and record-keeping and so on is obviously very important. Tanzania is making significant efforts on that, and we saw some of that. There has been a lot of progress.

Are there things we are doing or promoting as a government or as a country that we could be shifting gears on to make it more effective? Could we do doing more of something?

Mr. Kieran Breen: It's great that the Canadian government is supporting birth registration. I think it's vital to protect children by moving on that.

I think that sometimes where there's a will, on occasion there is a lack of technical competence. For example, sometimes information systems, dare I say even those of our own organization, aren't as strong as they could be. I think there's a real role for skilled Canadian professionals to go and work alongside counterparts, building databases, looking at information systems.

Anyone who's been in sub-Saharan Africa recently will know there's a growth in mobile phones. You may not be able to get much, but you will notice that everybody has a mobile phone. We think there are a lot of opportunities for looking at these simple new technologies for collecting data. I think it's that kind of exploring—without swamping people—of the possibilities that new technologies, such as mobile phones, bring to information collection. It's perhaps supplying that kind of person-led, volunteering-type accompaniment development over a longer term to work with people to develop it, rather than just dumping a system on them.

● (1155)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: One of the things I noticed in Tanzania was that the officials seemed to be, for the most part, pretty excited about technology and about getting their hands on the technology that we take for granted: cellphones and the ability to transfer data and so on.

Is there a role for—

The Chair: Mr. Hawn, that's all the time we have. We're going to catch you the next time around.

Thanks.

We're going to move over now to Mr. Garneau, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you for your testimony.

My first question is to Ms. Strong.

I'm familiar with the work of the Red Cross all over the world. It's commendable.

When I was young, I remember being told that when the Red Cross or the Red Crescent go into a war zone, everybody respects them and nobody shoots at them.

In a place like Syria, where we have some organizations, such as Daesh and some pretty lawless organizations, is it still the case that the Red Crescent can deliver help without feeling threatened, or is that a totally different picture now?

Ms. Patricia Strong: You raise an extremely important issue for us. Our movement has raised the fact that the safety of health care workers is no longer guaranteed. We're raising the profile of this globally through a project called Health Care in Danger.

Sadly in Syria we have lost more than 40 volunteers and staff who had been trying to serve the population. It's a really critical issue.

We are striving to ensure the safety of our workers all over the globe. It will always remain a priority for us.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

My second question is for Ms. Degnan Kambou.

We've talked quite a bit over the past few months about early and forced marriages and have been given quite a complete picture of the situation. Are you aware of any statistics that would indicate that child marriages are diminishing, if not in absolute terms but in relative terms, something that would show us that we are making progress on child marriages?

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: I wish I had more hopeful news for you. We do see movement. For example, if we take the case of Bangladesh, we see that the age of child marriage is increasing. So rather than girls being married perhaps at the age of 16, they're now being married at the age of 17. The age is increasing, but the same number of girls are having the same rite performed.

In terms of absolute numbers I would say it's probably holding. I think there are even instances within my own country of the United States of America, where interesting studies have been done by the Urban Institute documenting cases of early and forced child marriage here in the United States, in the 48 contiguous states. So there seems to be new evidence of the practice across the world.

If I just may add, in the situation of Nepal, and Syria, Pakistan, and Haiti, after conflict or natural disaster, we usually see increases in child marriage. One, it is in relation to people's reaction to social and economic disruption. Quite often people are very hard strapped and are struggling to survive. So the option of presumably marrying a daughter into safety, relieving the family of some financial burden, is often conducive to helping them make that decision.

Finally, as they were saying with the Red Cross, one way to protect a young girl from sexual violence in a family's mind, in the community's mind, is of course to marry them and have them under the protection of a husband.

I wish I had better news for you, sir.

● (1200)

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

Mr. Stevenson, you mentioned a rather alarming statistic of 6,000 women per week being infected. It seemed that the reason was that they needed money and therefore they sold their bodies for sex. That large number surprised me. Are there other reasons, cultural or societal, that women are infected simply because, let me put it bluntly, men take advantage of them, or is it really because many of them are saying, I'll have sex with you if you pay me for it?

Mr. David Stevenson: To clarify, the 6,000 infections every week in east and southern Africa are for the cohort of 15 to 24-year-old women and are not all due to sex work. The studies that have been done in five countries in eastern and southern Africa have basically averaged out that with a cash transfer payment you can reduce prevalence by 30% to 60% from that same cohort. What this suggests is that there is an economic rationale for infections, but not necessarily all from sex work though.

Mr. Marc Garneau: For Cuso, excuse my naïveté, but where does your funding come from? Does it come from the Government of Canada?

Mr. Kieran Breen: Yes.

Mr. Marc Garneau: I'm interested in the typical profile of one of these 250 skilled people. On average they are 43 years old. What kinds of skills do they bring?

Mr. Kieran Breen: It depends. It could be a 45-year-old business professional who has perhaps made a bit of money and wants to give something back to the world. We run a lot of economic development programs and they would be working, say, with small-scale farmers by helping them with thinking about how to get their goods to market. It could be a midwife who has reached the stage in her life where she thinks.... I guess what people realize is that they are global citizens. It's generally a skilled professional who wants to share his or her kind of skills. They are a diverse group. But if you got them together, I'd say the unifying thing would be that these are Canadians who care about the world and feel they've had a good life and want to give something back, and they have skills to share.

The Chair: We're going to start our second round now, which will be five minutes each.

I'll start with Mr. Schellenberger, for five minutes, sir.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Again following on Mr. Garneau's question, I'd like to follow up a wee bit.

I know that rule of law adds viability to communities. You've mentioned skilled professionals. I come from Perth—Wellington, and the Stratford Theatre is in my riding. You may know that it is part of an initiative with a theatre company in Suchitoto, El Salvador. There was a real problem with gangs and lawlessness there and the cause of a lot of this was that youth didn't have employment; they didn't have anything to do. So the Stratford Theatre with various groups, including the town of Suchitoto.... I think Cuso is part of that. Am I right?

Mr. Kieran Breen: They are a strong partner.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: It is a very strong partner. They didn't only start an acting group. They started a theatre company that required electricians, props people, seamstresses to make costumes, actors, and the whole realm, lighting and so on. What they do once a year—not only once a year but at various times—is send people there from the theatre for a month or two to teach some of these trades. What happens is that the people then go ahead and run the company. They've earned the skills and they've learned the skills, so maybe they will go out into the community and start their own businesses and become entrepreneurs, and someone else takes that.

I think this program has helped to reduce the gangs in the area and has helped bring the rule of law to that area. Could you speak to that, please?

● (1205)

Mr. Kieran Breen: Yes. You've given a good description. The Suchitoto program is a fantastic example of Canadian professionals working with partners in El Salvador and young people, with a view to equipping people with skills as well as addressing an issue.

In addition to the kind of technical skills that people develop, increasingly they use drama as a way of getting young people to think through the kind of violent situation you see in El Salvador, which in some places is quite extreme. It was only a few months ago we had a group of young people from El Salvador who came to Canada and put performances on, talking about their experiences growing up in El Salvador and the way gangs impact on them etc.

This is a model we are trying to pick up on, very much about trying to get that spirit of entrepreneurship in play. A lot of young people who end up in drug gangs really only want to make a living. They have an entrepreneurial streak, and the drug gangs offer them a way to quick money. We think with all that spirit, with guidance and mentoring, those young people can go down another path.

When you go there it's a bit strange to find young people in El Salvador at one level putting on a Shakespeare play, and you see they are really committed to it. You meet their families, who are living in little farming communities etc., but the whole community has got behind that and they can see what this is giving to them. It is the partnership as well, this Canadian-El Salvadorian partnership, and it shows a pathway out of poverty, out of violence, toward a very positive future.

It's a great project, and I'm very glad you brought it up.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

Mr. Stevenson, would you be able to explain how the Howard Buffett Foundation improves conditions in countries that are on the verge of conflict? Have there been any success stories where an investment went a long way to preventing a conflict?

Mr. David Stevenson: Yes. Speaking on the foundation work, Howard has done a whole host of investments in humanitarian conflict issues, particularly where he sees his foundation has a niche because others are not engaged in certain ways where he can engage.

One rather innovative thing that he's doing now, which you can find on the website, is financing Belgian sniffer dogs in the eastern Congo, searching out Joseph Kony, who has been on the loose for far too long. Howard says, “Well, let's try this.” It's again an example of a niche area that he'll work on.

Like me, he has spent a whole lot of time working for solutions in Africa, particularly on drought circumstances related to climate change and so on, solutions to get people out of this disaster cycle of droughts, floods, storms, and so on. That's where the solution approach goes to food security initiatives and nutrition initiatives. With the World Food Programme, we did a lot of “food for work” in restoring the agricultural production. In Rwanda, we supported the demobilization commission reconciliation process, with the returning of populations and resettlement.

There are all kinds of ways of linking support to an emergency response that help to build the conditions so the emergency will not return.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Schellenberger.

We're now going to move over to Madam Laverdière, please, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Strong, first, I would like to congratulate you on the efforts of the Canadian Red Cross in Nepal and around the world. My colleague Laurie Hawn's question was very interesting. It had to do with the protection of children and understanding the specific issues that they raise in a similar context.

That said, I would like to ask you the same question that I asked Ms. Degnan Kambou, namely, about the sustainable development goals.

How well do you think they meet the needs of children and youth, and specifically, what could we do to improve them?

● (1210)

[*English*]

Ms. Patricia Strong: Our focus on sustainable development goals has primarily been on those related to maternal, newborn, and child health. As you probably heard me say earlier, we're emphasizing the target of ending all preventable maternal and child deaths by 2030. We think this is very important.

But it isn't enough just to prevent those deaths. We really believe that people must survive and thrive and live a life with dignity as well, so we think in terms of the whole person. We would like to ensure that this interpretation of health is the one that is understood more broadly, as the WHO recognizes it, and is looking at much more than just the simple survival of children and mothers.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

Ms. Degnan Kambou, as we know, early and forced marriages often lead to unwanted pregnancies.

How can we make sure that young women and girls have access to the services they need in this area?

[*English*]

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: Thank you again for your question.

When a young girl has been married, quite frankly, in that first year in a new household, she's establishing her position within the family. And so childbearing, having that first pregnancy, is uppermost in everyone's mind. However once that first child has been born and she's established her fertility, then you can work with in-laws, the husband, the girl herself, and community leaders on how you can reintegrate the girl back into society.

There's a very well evaluated strategy that was done in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, which has a very high child-marriage rate. Working through community-based organizations, a global dialogue was started with community leaders about the practice of child marriage, about the costs to the individual mother, child, family, and community, and about the need to bring girls out of the household and help them get the kind of health services they would need to be healthy mothers and have healthy children, for their children as well.

It was also about helping build certain kinds of skills, financial literacy. If a young woman is able to join a village savings and loan group, a member of a peer group, and she's able to save, then how would she be able to invest those funds when they came to her, in terms of a small income-generating business for the family, which would help the household? In some cases it was even getting to the point of re-integrating the girls back into school, which doesn't happen in all cases, but it can be negotiated and successfully so.

What we saw at the end of that three-year program was indeed that, through this very participatory community-led process, we were able to negotiate gain through these young girls, and they themselves value that there's been progress in their lives. They have different ways of expressing that, but in terms of what might resonate with this committee, we see increased use of birth spacing methods, greater dialogue with husbands around sharing household burden, children having higher rates of vaccination, and strong participation in financial instruments within the community. So this all bodes well, not only for the household but also for the community.

So that kind of evidence exists and can be replicated in other communities.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to move over to Mr. Goldring for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for appearing here today.

I think my question is for Ms. Degnan Kambou, but if others have a comment on it too, I'd appreciate hearing it. It has to do with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and we all know the booklet that is put out regularly into our schools that lists it. Children are defined as under the age of 18, except if they're to be recruited into the military and then article 38 indicates they can be 15. Now we know that's been corrected by protocols since, but they're not mentioned in the booklet that we put out in our schools.

My question is out of my concern that many countries signed onto the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Were they intending to seek to support that, or were they intending to support and implement that? This would all come down to governance, and you had just mentioned that in one country, Ethiopia, child marriage is very common. So how many countries have signed the rights and the protocols, and how many of those countries would not be adhering to them? And does this not come down to governance?

The other question is this, amongst all the other questions I've asked. Is there a program that seeks to, I suppose, enumerate the countries on their successes of following these protocols? Could you comment on that?

● (1215)

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: Thank you, Mr. Goldring.

First allow me to say that I'm not an expert on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, so I'm not able to really speak to the heart of your question.

In terms of child marriage, the convention says that it's children under 18 other than, if its customary law, parents or local authorities who approve the marriage, and then it becomes a forced marriage. These are issues that we attempt to approach through global advocacy coalitions.

For example, Girls Not Brides, which is a representative coalition of communities across the world, speaks directly to legislation and works to ensure that 18 is the legal and enforced age of marriage in countries that are part of the coalition, always bringing to bear the evidence of the cost to the individual, the household, and the community should that age limit not be respected.

From an NGO perspective, our role is to continue to advocate for the best possible legislation and for its execution and implementation to protect the individuals under consideration and always to put the evidence before them as to why this makes the best sense in terms of both social and economic development.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So there are meetings with the various governments of the countries that have signed on to these protocols, and that's done under an organized fashion.

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: That's right.

It's organized, but it's not done by the global organization. It's done by the national chapter of the Girls Not Brides coalition. ICRW in the United States is the secretariat, so we would advocate with our government. The same would be true of Girls Not Brides Ethiopia. They would advocate with their government.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Would any of you others like to comment on the Rights of the Child?

Mr. Kieran Breen: Just from my Save the Children Fund experience from a few years back, the UN used to hold special sessions on the rights of the child, and there would be reports coming in from countries. I can remember the United Kingdom, for example, got in trouble for holding children 15 and under in adult prisons, because they didn't have enough.... You have countries getting a kind of score card being told you're doing well on this, you need to improve on that.

In answer to your question, if you want the reach of the UN convention, I think once again, in a lot of the countries I've worked in, the intention is there. It gets down to governance and the reach of government. Once again, when you get into a capital city, you get the middle-class elites, and there people understand the rights of children.

I've gone to Ethiopia; I lived in Ethiopia. People would talk about backwards people, as if it would be outrageous for a 13-year-old girl in Addis, say, who was middle class or what have you, with professional parents, to get married. People in the outward regions of Ethiopia have a different perspective. I think this is about getting into that cultural context, but also the ability of government to reach out.

I think this is where civil society plays a role, and often civil society groups are well placed to work at that level of challenging issues and perceptions.

● (1220)

Mr. Peter Goldring: The sense seems to be that it's easy to sign on to the agreement, but do they walk the talk when they return to their country?

The Chair: Thanks, Peter, that's good.

We're going to start a third round with Ms. Brown to lead us off for five minutes.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you so much for being here today.

Mr. Stevenson, in your comments you talked about stability, growth, and good governance. I wonder if you could elaborate on that a little bit, what that looks like as far as child protection is concerned.

I attended the Girl Summit with David Cameron in England last summer. I see from my notes from it that Zambia has a whole of government approach they have undertaken. Each ministry has a commitment within its scope of jurisdiction to address issues of gender equality.

In Somalia the government has committed to end some of the horrific cultural practices that girls undergo.

India has had legislation since 2006 to abolish early enforced marriage. In fact, they said that 250 million women voted in the last election.

In Pakistan they recognize they have a problem with early enforced marriage, but they've introduced laws there, too.

What does good governance look like? How does Canada help them with the enforcement part of that?

Mr. David Stevenson: I appreciate your observations in the questions in terms of governance in a number of countries.

Good governance can be explained in many ways, can't it, in the issues of child protection? I think one of the things affecting children and youth in many of the most vulnerable countries is the lack of a voice for women and mothers, particularly in parliaments and in other decision-making forums. You find that when there is a voice and an increased number of women in leadership positions, it does have a knock-on effect on the conditions for children and youth to reach their full potential.

A governments' legislative practices are crucial. With the global fund we had a decision point 2009, which is about recognizing the communities of the global fund, including men who have sex with men, and gay and lesbian communities. That decision said that we should only have global fund meetings in countries that do not have legislative restrictions on those kinds of choices.

In Africa there are three countries that qualify. This is something that we take as a given in terms of the rights of human beings to make choices in their relationships. I think legislation is also very important.

In terms of growth, others have laid out the case in the committee about the economic hindrances to children and youth reaching their full potential. I gave an example of adolescent girls in southern Africa. There are many more examples where economic growth simply helps create the conditions for freedom and movement of youth and children.

On stability, the humanitarian crises in the world pose constant protection threats to women, children, and youth. They are also an opportunity, frankly, to engage in positive ways to help set the conditions for lasting stability, as I laid out in my Rwandan example. At the same time through schools, health care, and legislative practices, we work to ensure the rights of children and youth are there for them to grow.

Ms. Lois Brown: Ms. Kambou, to follow up on that, you said that you've been working on the issue of early and forced marriage for two decades.

Can you give us some examples of places where we are seeing some progress? Is there something that Canada can do to underpin that success and show other countries or cultural groups that this is an improvement in their economy, in the health of women, and in the education for children? Can you give us some examples?

Dr. Sarah Degnan Kambou: Yes, I can. Let me take you to India, since you mentioned India and South Asia in your introductory comments. Haryana state, which is just north of Delhi, has one of the most strikingly disproportionate sex ratios in terms of missing girls. It also had an unusual government in power from 1994 to 1998 that recognized that if they wanted to change downstream the value and experience of young girls, especially among the extreme poor, they would need to introduce some kind of social policy that would increase the value down the road of those girls. They put together the Apni Beti Apna Dhan social policy. Families earning under $15 a month at the time of the birth of their daughters had the option to enrol their daughters in this program, with the promise that if the girl remained unmarried at 18 years, she would receive a bond payment in her name totalling probably the equivalent today of $100 or $120, which is a lot of money for a family in those economic conditions.

Now, the reason I cite this as a case is that this was a natural experiment. You had families who opted in and families who did not, all coming from that same socio-economic class. These girls, of course, began turning 18 as of two years ago. We have been working with the Haryana state government to understand what has been the pathway and success of this social policy. The final data analysis is undergoing.

We have found that girls in the experimental group, those whose families signed them up for the bond, in fact stayed in school longer, and 11% of them have delayed their age at marriage, now that they're 18 or 19 years old. In the control group, made up of girls not enrolled in the program, the girls ended school much earlier and have had slightly more propensity to marry at an early age.

It's important to see the importance of social policy and conditional cash transfers in creating social change at an accelerated pace within a community. What's interesting about this particular strategy is that it was very delayed, very deferred, gratification. They had to wait 18 years for the results to kick in, if you will. There are now new programs across India that have intermediate payments or support to the girls and their families to help them along that pathway.

Looking at that kind of evidence, perhaps Canada could begin to integrate some of these findings or recommendations into their development policy about where they would like to invest in this particular issue in terms of solutions. To be able to replicate and scale these kinds of solutions I think makes very good sense. It's good investment sense.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lois Brown: Mr. Chair, could we just ask that the information be submitted to the committee for our consideration?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Is that possible, Doctor? When the final report is done, it would be great if that could be submitted.

Mr. Dewar, sir, you have five minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all our guests who have provided some superb testimony, and certainly have different points of view. That's very helpful for our work.

I note, Chair, the discussion around what's happening in disaster areas. Sadly, we have a real-time example with Nepal. I was just reading that United Nations Population Fund representative Priya Marwah spoke about what's happening on the ground in Nepal. It's a quote from an article from the UN and it says: “Many women lose access to essential reproductive health services and give birth in appalling conditions without access to safe delivery services and lifesaving care.”

It goes on about some of the things we've talked about. Clearly there's work to be done.

I know in Ottawa here there's very strong support for an agency called Child Haven, which does extraordinarily good work with single mothers and children who have been abandoned. Right now, just talking to locals, people who are connected on the ground, people are safe but they're outside of the building and they have nowhere to live right now. That is safe, in a way.

Really, the work we're talking about here is in real time and in front of us.

I want to talk about an issue we've dealt with here at committee. We haven't touched on it yet today. It's the whole issue of child labour. We were seized with the issue after Rana Plaza. I think it was a wake-up call, frankly, for Canadian companies to establish what their responsibilities were. We know the whole supply chain issue is very important. I use Rana Plaza because people know of it, but we also know it's happening all the time, and it just so happened this factory collapse really focused our minds and our attention. We had issues around kids working in deplorable conditions.

I remember one story of an 11-year-old girl who didn't want to go back to work the day the collapse happened because they had been warned that there were concerns around the integrity of that building, but she was forced to by a manager. She was 11 years old. She survived and she was able to tell her story.

When we're talking about child protection, I think we should also include that.

I'm curious to hear from any of our witnesses.

Maybe, Mr. Stevenson, I'll start with you. What is the role? I've been very supportive of the initiatives of Loblaw, in particular, on the accord. We know the reality. It's not like we're going to shut down these factories tomorrow and kids are going to go and live in wonderfully supported homes. They go to work because they have to.

Where's that in the constellation of child protection, making sure that we provide supports, protection, and opportunities for kids who go to work because they have to be the breadwinners? It seems to me that in 2015, after the Kielburgers kicked off things I don't know how many years ago, we're still dealing with this stubborn issue. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are on that issue.

● (1230)

Mr. David Stevenson: Frankly, I'd like to answer it from the point of view of the amalgamated department that you have helped work with here in Ottawa, the nexus of foreign policy/development and trade, and the opportunity that gives Canada to work in a cohesive fashion on this kind of issue. I think it's a huge opportunity.

From the foreign policy point of view, we're working with governments and advising on legislative issues, on diplomatic negotiations, to encourage the kinds of standards we have here in Canada—our global standards. That's what I was reflecting on when I talked about Canadian belief systems and so on in my intervention.

From the development point of view, obviously we should understand the reasons that private enterprises in developing countries have those kinds of practices in place. Our aid portfolio can help address some of those issues in an appropriate way, as part of a package. I think that's starting a little bit with the amalgamated framework.

Then, on trade, and certainly the trade practices of Canadian business interests, I can only say that I support the encouragement—for lack of a better expression—of Canadian investment interests to behave in other countries as they would behave in Canada, though, as you said in your question, understanding local conditions and norms and working towards that, potentially, in a gradual way. That would be the standard that should be applied.

I think it's doable with this combined foreign policy/development trade opportunity that we have coming out of Ottawa.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Could I have some other comments from other witnesses?

Ms. Patricia Strong: I'd like to add something that I brought into the talk earlier, and in response to a number of the questions, the emphasis on the strength of local organizations is absolutely critical. In the Red Cross, we really believe that the nationals of a country, wherever possible, should be able to speak and advocate for themselves, thus strengthening some really incredible and brave organizations that are working on these issues. Going back to the issue of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that's the same thing. It's an absolutely essential part of it. I think my colleague also raised this in his answer, that civil society is a real key here.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Trottier, sir, it's your turn.

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for being here today.

I want to build on Mr. Dewar's comments because it's pretty important, I think, when you think about how the world has changed in the last 50 years, especially when you look at some of the flows to developing countries, or as some prefer to call them, “emerging economies”, where direct foreign investment plays such an important role now. There are also remittances and philanthropy too. And of course trade flows are a longer-term way that these countries can emerge out of poverty and address some of the social issues.

Mr. Breen, you talked about some private sector partners that Cuso has. By the way, I was quite surprised when you mentioned that the average age of your Cuso volunteers was in the 40s, because I always think of Cuso as university service overseas of university students, but clearly the model has changed.

Can you describe some examples where your organization might have worked with some in the private sector, some Canadian foreign investors? In many countries.... By the way, Canadian companies are the major foreign investor in Africa. I was with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania yesterday, and he talked about a company out of Calgary called Bankers Petroleum as the single biggest investor in that country, the single biggest taxpayer, the single biggest exporter, leading to opportunities for young people and all kinds of people. If they worked with an organization like Cuso, for example, they could address some of the issues of youth engagement that you talked about.

● (1235)

Mr. Kieran Breen: We attempt to build corporate partnerships. Scotiabank is an organization that we've worked with in the past. One aspect of that is their releasing their staff to volunteer in our programs. We find they bring different skill sets. So perhaps historically your classic Cuso volunteer would have been somebody with a community work background or perhaps a teacher or a doctor. But increasingly we're working on business development.

We're also looking at strengthening management systems. One of the things that the civil society groups, the governments, the local governments that we work with face is that quite often with information systems, somewhere between the idea and the delivery there's a breakdown in the ability to take an idea from a policy and make it happen. We have found that often our corporate people, say from Scotiabank, have that business mind, the skills around business planning, how to get your ideas out there. So coaching and mentoring people on planning, delivering, etc., is important. Scotiabank springs to mind.

We've also worked with people like Deloitte. One of the things a lot of the organizations we work with have is financial management. I think in the developing world, there's a whole heap of issues that come from people's inability to manage their money. Having really skilled professionals working with people, looking at financial systems, how best to manage your resources.... We get a lot of MBA-type business professionals coming out of our partners and doing a lot of work around planning, system strengthening, really helping people to run better and more efficient organizations. Often a lot of our partners, particularly in civil society, have a lot of good intentions, a lot of drive, but it's that ability to take your ideas and to deliver.... What we often find is that our private sector volunteers bring in some slightly harder skills about how to deliver, and I think that's worked pretty well.

Mr. Bernard Trottier: What about you, Mr. Stevenson? Do you have examples? There's the example of a Canadian company that's made an investment in another country, and as part of their mandate for some corporate social responsibility, historically they'll say they'll build a hospital or a road or some capital project. What about more of a youth-oriented program, and that real core issue of getting kids out of gangs? There's the example of El Salvador or countries like Honduras where the narco gangs have such a draw on young people. How can you work with some organizations who have some resources, but don't necessarily have the expertise, to build some youth-oriented programs? Do you have examples of that in your organization?

Mr. David Stevenson: I can't speak from experience of Canadian companies. I know that when I was with the department as a director general dealing with children and youth issues, we looked at opportunities in the mining sector and made some progress in the mining sector on these kinds of partnerships, which I'm sure you're aware of. That gives me optimism that progress can be made. I don't have experience with other Canadian private sector firms and investments. I think that the good work done in the mining sector in terms of corporate social responsibility, in terms of positive engagement from the development wing of the department in collaboration with the trade wing and engagement by the ambassadors, and in terms of helping encourage conditions at the workplace, in the mines, has all been relatively positive.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trottier.

I'm going to ask a question of Mr. Stevenson. I had a chance to go to South Sudan a while ago. You had good experience—I think you said 18 years with the World Food Programme. I was with an organization trying to help the people mechanize their farming. They negotiated the land along the Nile, great land. They brought containers of seed, then they sourced local seed. They brought farm equipment and they sourced local equipment, and yet they still couldn't make it happen.

You guys are involved in agriculture, and you've had great experience in the World Food Programme. Talk to us a bit about the challenges countries have, whether it's through governance or experience or whatever. I ask because they had fertile land along the Nile River they had negotiated for through the government. They had the land and they had the local people who they were training, yet they were still not able to actually produce any food. There's been conflict, obviously, in South Sudan. I get that. And there have been tribal issues. Talk to us about maybe some success you've seen in some countries and the challenges that still need to be overcome in order to help small farmers or help them become mechanized farms, whatever those things are, based on your experience with the World Food Programme and what you're doing at the foundation.

● (1240)

Mr. David Stevenson: That's exactly what my first priority is with the foundation. I didn't say it in my opening remarks, but Howard announced in December, after I had been in Rwanda for three or four weeks, a $500 million initiative—quite significant—to help Rwanda over a two-to-ten year period on modernizing agricultural growth. It's about mechanized farming, season fertilizer, post-harvest infrastructure, and so on. Why did he do it? What were the conditions that we saw were in place that could make this work? One is that they're all small-scale farms. In fact, Rwanda has very small land holdings—less than half a hectare per person. But the government has a policy for consolidated farming and cooperative farming.

What supports it is that the government has now issued land tenure to all of the small-scale farmers, so they actually have a piece of paper that tells them exactly where their land is. It looks like a Google map, a computer printout. It's a picture, and it's registered that they own land. That's one of the biggest constraints to this kind of development in Africa, and no doubt in southern Sudan, the issue of land ownership.

Then there are all kinds of supply chain issues, which I suspect you confronted in southern Sudan, which just create barriers to this kind of growth, including importing equipment and the skills base to actually assemble and maintain the equipment, and on and on.

We're on this road in Rwanda. I'm quite convinced that the conditions are better in Rwanda than they are in southern Sudan, but that doesn't mean that this kind of lesson can't be helpful for southern Sudan. That's our hope that if we can get small-scale farming going and behaving a little bit like large-scale farms in terms of production and agricultural growth, and ensuring that the well-being of the small-scale farmer is always at the forefront in the initiative, we'll be able to transfer some of these lessons learned about good governance, about land tenure, and about assembly, maintenance, and supply chain, and that it can make it work.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, are there any other questions?

Go ahead, Romeo.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): I want to get back briefly to the challenges as they relate to volunteers. I was intrigued by a comment made by Mr. Breen about the need for new models of volunteers. I wonder if you can expand on that and provide some examples. I think it's an important component in all of these international efforts that we have. I was intrigued by that remark. It did not escape me when Ms. Strong talked about the volunteers and how she insisted on the expression, “trained volunteers”. I think it's an important component in all of this and I'd like Mr. Breen to expand on that.

Mr. Kieran Breen: In CUSO International, if you go back 50 years, a volunteer was a university graduate who wanted to help the world. We've moved on. Over the last decade, if you go back 10 years, your average volunteer was a mid-40s professional, skilled and committed, whom we've asked for and trained, and who would then go often for two years to a country. Increasingly, with changes in the economy and the kind of marketplace and skills, we've been looking at whether placements could go for three or six months and still make a difference. We found that the answer is yes. Increasingly we have volunteers working with a partner. We may have a two-year volunteer working with a partner with somebody coming in for three months to set up a database and train people on it.

We are increasingly looking at the possibilities of e-volunteering. Our health work is one of those areas that could possibly be very helpful where you would have skilled Canadian medical professionals who are a Skype call away from coaching and mentoring health professionals in Africa and in Asia. At the moment this is an exciting area of work that we're developing. We're looking at how to make that work.

We're also looking into tapping into the diaspora communities much more. Canada has a rich diversity of communities who clearly have a good understanding of the countries we work in. We're looking at how best can we utilize those resources. There are lots of benefits to that. Outside of the Canadian experience, we also support what we call staff-to-staff volunteering. For example, it may be there are skilled doctors in Kenya who want to work in Uganda or Tanzania. These are other models.

I think if I were looking going forward, our volunteering would be more about customer service and flexible response and not having a one-size-fits-all approach. Perhaps 20 years ago you could have a volunteer for two years or you couldn't have one. It's about building a relationship with a partner and then having a portfolio of volunteers. You could be working with a hospital and a midwife who has gone there for two years and who is going to be working with them. You have a doctor in Canada who's being an e-volunteer supporting them. You have some MBA-type business volunteers coming in to help them with the running of the hospital. They're coming in for perhaps three months a year over a five-year period to progress work plans.

That's the kind of way we're taking it forward. What is essential to all of that is this idea that they are professional people who are trained to understand, value, and respect the people they're working with. They're not going there to tell people, but to learn, share, and work with.

● (1245)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you.

The Chair: To all our witnesses, Mr. Breen, Ms. Bucio, Mr. Stevenson, Ms. Strong, and of course, Dr. Kambou, in Washington, thank you for being here today.

They're all great organizations doing very interesting things.

We definitely appreciate your presentations today. Thank you.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.