Supportive Public Policies

Changing the rules to enable positive change

What are Supportive Public Policies, and why are they important?

Any positive results produced by programmes at the individual and community level are difficult to scale and sustain without supportive local, regional or national laws and policies. Sometimes these results are only possible when certain policies are in place. For example, in the education sector, policy regulations set standards to guide schools in terms of human resources, infrastructure, curricula and available technologies, as well as the way children are treated.
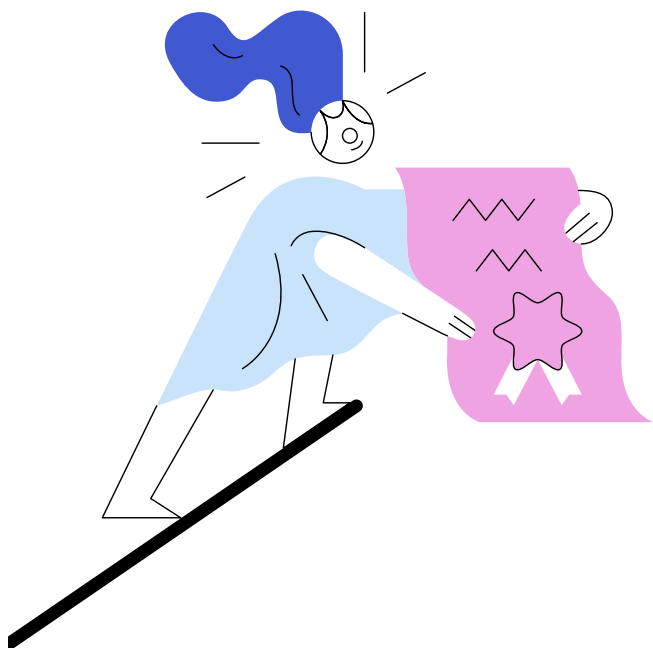
Through the use of regulation, legislation, incentives, penalties and public policy, we can achieve programmatic goals, including positive Social and Behaviour Change outcomes. Development stakeholders can play a huge role in creating policies that facilitate positive change, bridging local conditions with national priorities through evidence generation, advocacy, and by empowering citizen and community participation in local governance.

The basics of Supportive Public Policies

Public policies can be thought of as guidelines made by the government or other national or local decision-makers that drive public action. We refer to these policies as 'supportive' when they create an enabling environment for SBC objectives. Supportive policies can be national laws that reduce harmful practices like domestic violence or those that direct more resources to help children, like parenting programmes. Laws that criminalize child labour and support breastfeeding in the workplace also work to protect the dignity, safety and well-being of women, men and children. Supportive policies can reinforce social safety nets for under-

served families, enforce local governance to empower communities through decision-making roles and establish frameworks to generate data and evidence in support of action planning. Such policies can also keep public officials and departments accountable to the people through laws that regulate public expenditure and key sectors like water and sanitation, environmental health, road safety, tobacco control and food safety.

How can Supportive Public Policies be achieved?

In practice, supportive public policies can be achieved by:

Directly engaging policy-makers. Institutional advocacy can lead to political commitment to change laws, systems and policies that align with the child and human rights agenda, as well as the allocation of resources and support to implement and monitor these changes.

Facilitating citizen and community participation. By implementing tools like public hearings and debates, radio forums, online interactive platforms, citizen engagement and community consultation mechanisms, community members (including children and young people) can be meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Engagement at the local, subnational and national level will help to ensure that the needs, interests and concerns of community members influence the development, implementation and evaluation of public policies.

Ensuring accountability of authorities (duty-bearers) to citizens (right-holders) at all levels of the system. Examples of accountability mechanisms include transparent information systems, contractual and partnership arrangements, community feedback processes, and media, influential networks or coalitions. These mechanisms can foster feedback loops and ensure decision-makers are transparent about the reasons behind their decisions and held accountable for delivering on them.

Improving equity of local governance. More equitable governance can be achieved by generating geographically and socially disaggregated data on how children in various communities are faring in terms of health, education, social protection and other key areas. Governments can use that data to allocate funding to benefit the children most in need.

Developing behaviourally-informed public policies. By developing information systems that collect and analyse social and behavioural data, we can advocate for the use of social and behavioural insights to inform policies, programmes and services.

Social and behavioural objectives

Influencing the regulatory environment to support social and individual behaviour change can help attain various objectives:

- The adjustment of government priorities

- Changes to national processes, administrative procedures and systems, guidelines, policies, strategies and programmes

- The re-allocation of resources and funding to priority areas and activities

- Increased public awareness and advocacy for programme priorities and initiatives

- Increased social accountability

- Increased citizen participation in local governance decisions

- Increased social cohesion

The limits of Supportive Public Policies

The development and implementation of Supportive Public Policies is fully dependent on the authorities in place. Depending on the government(s) in power, national and subnational priorities and views may shift to be less supportive of policies that facilitate positive change. Similarly, such policies may be difficult to achieve in countries where leadership is not clearly defined (e.g., in periods of internal conflict or after a political coup).

Supportive Public Policies cannot drive Social and Behaviour Change alone. Regulations need to align with ongoing work driving Social and Behaviour Change. Without this alignment, a change in public policy can have adverse effects, such as driving harmful practices underground. For example, passing a law that criminalizes a certain behaviour, such as marital rape or child marriage, may not reduce the practice but rather, cause it to disappear from sight. Without engaging communities to incite change at the local level, punitive policies can make certain behaviours even more difficult to detect or to provide relevant care and services.

Case studies and examples

UKRAINE: UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative resulted in participating municipalities budgeting 50 million USD for child-related activities.

MONGOLIA: UNICEF's Child Friendly Community strategy resulted in priority issues for children being integrated in Khuvsgul province's mid-term development plan. This plan included the creation of children's councils in 18 out of 24 soums in Khuvsgul province to enable the prioritization of children's issues in decision-making.

GHANA: A comparative assessment index developed through a partnership between UNICEF Ghana, the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, the University of Ghana, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and the Office of the Head of Local Government Service informed both district-level and national policy dialogue and decision-making.

NEPAL: The Nepalese government declared public hearings mandatory for all local bodies and included public hearings in the government's service guidelines.

THE DRC: The use of social accountability community scorecards in Tuungane resulted in better government service delivery due to increased involvement of health and education user committees in the management of services, improvements in staff attendance and technical capacities and a reduction in barriers to accessing services.

BURKINA FASO: UNICEF supported the development of a Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) in the education sector, which resulted in the strengthening of local authority capacities and citizen participation, showing positive effects on the quality of public financial management and supplies, materials and infrastructure for the primary education sector.

VIET NAM: A multisectoral National Traffic Safety Committee established in 1997 led the development, implementation and monitoring of a motorcycle helmet law in 2007, resulting in a significant increase in helmet usage and decrease in road traffic deaths.

FIJI: As part of its commitment to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, Fiji amended its tobacco control laws in 2010 and 2012, establishing a tobacco control enforcement unit. This unit has helped to eliminate the illicit trade of tobacco and increase the capacity of nurses and other health staff to implement tobacco cessation interventions in primary health-care centres.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: After ratifying the Beijing Platform for Action, the government was obliged to normalize gender perspectives through its policies and programmes, resulting in the adoption of a health sector gender policy in 2013.

Key principles

1. **Advocate for public policies that protect the rights of children**. UNICEF and other key stakeholders must advocate for national and local laws to be passed that support children in reaching their full potential. This starts with making sure their basic needs are being met. Policies should support Social and Behaviour Change interventions on the ground that will service these goals, such as policies around inclusion of girls in the classroom as well as the promotion of maternity and paternity leave.

2. **Shape Supportive Public Policies by understanding how national decisions are made**. UNICEF and other key stakeholders that undertake activities with the goal of influencing policy decisions must have an adequate understanding of how these decisions are made. Being knowledgeable about the national government, its regulatory processes, and what existing policies are effectively supporting SBC objectives is vital to advocating for more Supportive Public Policies.

3. **Empower civil society and communities to influence decision-making and hold governments accountable**. UNICEF and other key stakeholders can generate interest and build capacity of governments to solicit community perspectives in their decision-making processes. Providing tools and mechanisms for communities to contribute can empower individuals to partake in local governance and hold public entities accountable.

4. **Provide local governments with the resources to generate local data and advocate for local priorities with the central government**. UNICEF and other key stakeholders can provide training support to local governments on data collection methodologies and tools. Collecting local data makes it easier to identify local priorities and advocate for them at the national level.

More information

- UNICEF Local Governance Programming Guidance

- UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative

- The ASK Approach to advocacy

- Child-focused Public Expenditure Measurement: A Compendium of Country Initiatives

- Child Participation in Local Governance: A UNICEF Guidance Note

- Getting Started with Policy Co-Design by The British Council

- Policy briefs on local governance and public finance:
    - Cover Note
    - Improving Budget Performance
    - Putting Data to Work for Children
    - Budget Transparency
    - Upgrading Public Finance Management Capacity