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Putting child safety online first

Unicef has been working with Malaysia since 1954 to give children a headstart in life by supporting programmes on health and education, and addressing HIV issues, child violence and child safety in cyberspace. **Rozana Sani** talks to its representative to Malaysia and Brunei, Youssouf Oomar, to find out more.



Biodata

YOUSSEOUF Oomar took over the helm of Unicef Malaysia in January last year, having completed a four-year term as resident representative of Unicef Côte d'Ivoire. His vision at Unicef is aligned to his aim to instill a sense of urgency of the Millennium Development Goals and their 2015 deadline, and to make sure that the agency's policies and programmes are oriented around achieving these goals.

While at Côte d'Ivoire, Oomar pushed hard to lead Unicef's response to advance the rights of children in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child by supporting child health and nutrition, quality basic education for all children, access to clean water and sanitation, and the protection of children from violence and exploitation and the impact of AIDS.

Q: How serious is the issue of child safety in cyberspace?

A: There are many challenges that children face growing up in the modern world. In addition to the struggle for basic survival and needs in some poor countries, children are increasingly confronted with rapid social and technological changes and a more competitive society. As young people become exposed to external pressures and influences in such an environment, they have to face threats such as AIDS, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and exploitation.

Children face violence and exploitation from different sources, not just within the home, school and community settings, but also their use of Internet and mobile technologies. Cyberspace threats are just as serious as other threats facing children. If online child safety cannot be guaranteed, then children are at a higher risk of abuse, exploitation and social problems.

Q: Given the Internet penetration level in Malaysia, which is comparatively lower than in more advanced countries, how important is it to establish cyberspace protection measures for children here?

A: The number of Internet users in Malaysia in 2006 was 519 per 1,000 people, according to EPU (Economic Planning Unit). From the figures, Malaysia ranked higher than Thailand (141 per 1,000 people) and Indonesia (93 per 1,000 people), but lower than Singapore (663 per 1,000 people) and the United States (703 per 1,000 people).

EPU also reported that the number of mobile phone subscribers in 2005 was 752 per 1,000 people, which is comparable to the US at 714 per 1,000 people.

These figures show that Malaysia is catching up with developed countries in terms of Internet and mobile phone usage. The Malaysian Government is actively encouraging the use of the Internet by expanding broadband coverage, ensuring that schoolchildren are ICT literate, and equipping schools with broadband technology.

Children are the most active users of the Internet, but also the most vulnerable. Without precautionary measures, the cyberspace can be a potentially threatening environment in which children can be exposed to hate messages, sexually explicit materials, graphic violence, exploitative marketing, online fraud and child predators who roam the chatrooms. It is important to protect children from cyberspace threats so they are able to enjoy using the Internet safely.

Q: Potential risks through contact in cyberspace are plenty. What do you think poses the most danger to children in Malaysia?

A: The Internet has an amazing potential as a learning and communication tool, but it also contains hidden threats to the safety and well-being of children, including online gaming sites that can result in unhealthy addiction, cyber bullying and victimisation through mobile phones that can bring about severe consequences to a child's self-confidence and personal development, as well as exploitative marketing that may have financial consequences on the child and his parents.

Another threat that may not be immediately obvious but is of great concern, is the

potential for children to be exposed to sexual harassment, exploitation and pornography through online chats and social networking sites.

Children are also vulnerable as targets of fraudsters who try to gain knowledge about them to abuse, terrorise, blackmail, steal or even kidnap them.

To counter these threats, parents and caregivers are primarily responsible for protecting their charges, by supervising their access to cyberspace, coaching children in personal safety and installing parental control software. Schools, public authorities, community groups, Internet service providers, media industries and regulatory bodies also have a responsibility to ensure that children are properly advised on the benefits and perils of cyberspace and equipped with the skills to safeguard themselves.

Q: What measures do you think should be in place to safeguard children against online threats?

A: The Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees children's rights to access and share information that will allow them to express themselves for the benefit of their well-being. As the Internet is a valuable medium that allows children to explore and develop their full potential, we believe that protective measures are critical to make sure that the Internet is child-friendly and that it promotes, rather than damages, children's self-development.

There should be a focus on prevention in addressing child safety and ICT through campaigns that support parents and adults in providing better understanding of ICT and supervising children who use ICT. Governments, industry providers, regulatory

agencies and the community should ensure that parents and caregivers have access to technology that can protect children such as parental control or filtering software and child-friendly software, which can be downloaded for free. Information on how to download such tools should be made available to all consumers, for example, by distributing leaflets to all Internet subscribers.

Parents, teachers and the community also should be given information on how to contact the local regulatory agency (the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission/MCMC) and police so they are able to report sites, search engines and Internet service providers that are harmful to children. Greater attention also should be paid to the prosecution of offenders.

Q: Is your organisation involved in any project to do just this?

A: Cyberspace threats are fairly new, but the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which turns 20 this year, clearly underlines the principles for children's protection in all aspects.

Unicef welcomes the *World Telecommunications and Information Society Day's* theme this year (which is *Protecting Children in Cyberspace*) as it provides the opportunity to focus on children's safety in cyberspace. We commend the initiatives around the event (celebrated on May 17), particularly the campaign by MCMC to raise awareness about child protection in cyberspace through the print media.

By supporting MCMC in spreading the message that cyberspace threats are not to be ignored, Unicef hopes that more sectors will be encouraged to take on the responsibility to ensure child safety online.