Advances in Social Norms Explored in University of Pennsylvania-UNICEF Learning Course

July 2011 - Forty-six UNICEF colleagues from multiple areas including child protection, education, health, WASH, social policy, C4D and national committees completed the learning course on "Advances in Social Norms" at the University of Pennsylvania from July 4-15, 2011. In their words "The course provided us with important new perspectives, opening our eyes, minds and hearts to ways in which we can promote positive social change for children, where the change covers all children and is self-sustaining." Course Directors Dr. Cristina Bicchiere of University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Gerry Mackie of University of California at San Diego brought years of experience in social science theory on social norms and social norm change. Participants applied the concepts to real problems they confront in their work with UNICEF by working independently and together on in-depth case studies and explored new angles of a programme response using a social norms perspective.

The course was developed by Child Protection Section/PD, together with OLDS, and first offered in 2010. Following the very positive evaluation by participants and the very strong internal demand it was repeated in 2011. The course examines social norms in the context of
societal factors that “drive” inequities and fuel behaviours and practices that result in discrimination and deprivations and provides participants with tools to effectively address social norms within the framework of human rights approach to programming. Key topics covered by the course include:

>> How social practices (social imitation, social conventions, social norms) differ from one another and from moral norms and how each works. How different collective expectations support each of them and the dynamics of such expectations.

>> How legal rules interact with existing social norms, and their role in signalling and supporting practice that favour children's well-being.

>> The latest experimental findings about how people make choices in relational contexts. The types of positive and negative sanctions that motivate people to comply with social norms and the characteristic emotional states associated with each type of practice.

>> The various ways in which social practices can emerge and the various ways in which they can change. Why exclusively informational or exclusively legal strategies may not work for relational problems, and how to integrate informational and legal strategies with organized group change of social practices.

>> The dynamics of change in social practices over time and the importance of critical thresholds in attaining change. How to recognize differences in social network structure and how to take advantage of them in programme design.

Participants noted that they found the course of great use because it opened their minds to additional ways to analyze major problems faced by children and design appropriate action. They also stressed that by “bringing practitioners together from various UNICEF programme areas the course served to develop a common institutional understanding on how the social norms perspectives can improve UNICEF’s programmes and policies at all levels.” [For the full participants closing remarks and feedback click here.]