

4 March 2005

**STATEMENT BY MR. HANS SPRUIJT ON BEHALF OF THE UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE**

Honored Guests,  
Colleagues  
Youth participants  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Indemin Aderachuh! Inkwan Aderesachuh!

Good morning and congratulations to all of you, members of the Ethiopian Youth Forum, for once again putting together an impressive programme on a subject of vital importance to young people – not just in Ethiopia – but across the African continent and developing countries around the world.

It has barely been one month since UNICEF hosted a group of young people your age from different parts of Africa, including Ethiopia, to participate in the Africa Unite Symposium. Some of you sitting here today were probably among them. I am sure that experience remains fresh in your memories.

I had the privilege of observing some of your discussions at the symposium and one thing that all of you made absolutely clear to everyone sitting in those meeting rooms was that youth are not just the future of Africa – youth are the present. If you are the present, then it is imperative that you are engaged in the development agenda and made partners in all social, economic and political spheres. That is the only way that any meaningful change for the better is going to take place in countries like Ethiopia where youth make up such a large segment of the population.

I must tell you that all of us at UNICEF are extremely impressed that it has taken you less than one month to conduct and analyse a survey covering three towns with over a thousand responses, and organized this meeting today where your findings will be presented and discussed. Bravo. I am looking very much forward to hearing the results.

I encourage you to use today to the fullest to engage each other further on this subject. Speak up, express yourselves, listen to each other and learn from each other. This is very important because at the end of the day we will be waiting to learn from you. At UNICEF, working with youth or adolescents in their second decade of life has over recent years become a major focus of our programmes. We believe that the best way

to achieve success is to work with you, for you, and to give you opportunities to be in the driver's seat as we chart new ground in our development work.

I am looking forward to hearing your recommendations and plan of action for addressing the issues that you and your peers have identified with regard to unemployment and youth later this afternoon. I understand that H.E. Ato Hassen Abdella, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs will be joining you for the closing ceremony to receive these recommendations and plan of action. I therefore encourage you to make sure that you use this opportunity well. Ministers and high government officials have very busy schedules which often limit their opportunities for direct interaction with youth like yourselves. Today you are not just representing yourselves, 230 students seated here, you are representing the thousands who have expressed themselves through your survey and in the discussions that you have held on the subject in preparation for today's meeting.

This exercise in youth participation and engagement with stakeholders who are responsible for developing and implementing policies that affect youth comes at a critical and potentially opportune juncture.

How many of you in this room are 18-years-old or older? Please raise your hands. How many of you have registered to vote?

As I am sure you are all aware, we are in the midst of an election year in Ethiopia. You are probably aware of the election campaigns that the various political parties are conducting. You should be asking yourselves, do those campaigns reflect the reality that you so adamantly insisted on during the Africa Unite Symposium that youth are Ethiopia's and Africa's present as well as future and therefore issues affecting youth should be put at the forefront of the development agenda? Are your issues being addressed by the various competing parties? What are they proposing to do about unemployment and creating job opportunities for young people who are completing their education and entering the work force? There will be many who will be keen to hear your thoughts and insights.

You probably have also heard that this year's Africa Development Forum which is being organized by the UN Economic Commission for Africa in collaboration with partner agencies including UNICEF, will focus on youth (I am sure my colleague from UNECA Mr. Robert Okello, will share more details about that with you.) Some of you have already participated in preparatory meetings including the pre-ADF workshop that was held immediately following the Africa Unite Symposium in Addis Ababa. Livelihoods and the challenges of employment facing African youth have already been identified as one of the core subject areas to be addressed at the ADF. The process you have started in preparing for today and the outcomes of this forum session itself will no doubt enrich Ethiopia's participation at ADF.

But you should not stop here. I am pleased to see that you are not only developing recommendations as an outcome to this meeting but also a plan of action, which is critical. Allow me to make a suggestion – when you develop your recommendations and plan of action, consider how to improve youth participation in the democratic exercise underway in Ethiopia and the upcoming elections. Consider also how best to prepare for the ADF. Explore possibilities for networking with other youth groups in Ethiopia and conducting your survey on this and other critical issues affecting young people beyond Addis Ababa and its environs.

In closing I want you to know how pleased we are at UNICEF to see this forum, which we have supported since it was formed by six teenagers who had all in some way participated in the Special Session on Children in 2002, mature to the level we see before us today. We are encouraged to see you taking the lead from among your peers from other parts of the continent to build on the momentum generated during the Africa Unite Symposium and pre-ADF workshop that followed. We will help you to maintain the networking that you developed with your peers who had gathered from other parts of the continent. We want you to be able to share your experiences with them as well as to learn from what they are doing in their countries. UNICEF will support you in these endeavors.

Again, I wish you a vibrant and fruitful discussion.

Good luck and thank you.