

**STATEMENT BY UNICEF ETHIOPIA REPRESENTATIVE MR BJORN LJUNGQVIST
At The Consultation Workshop: Protecting Orphans and Vulnerable Children In
Celebration of the Day of the African Child:
June 16-17, 2005**

Your Excellencies,

DAC can stand for many things. We know it as the Day of African Child. But it could also mean the Dreams of African Children. The DAC is on the 16th June in memory of a whole generation of children in South African who dared to dream and stand up to the oppressive system which tried to destroy their dreams both generally and specifically through the enforcement of their language.

The DAC could also mean the Dreams for African Children. The Millennium Development Goals of which we talk so often are the dreams for all our children here in Africa. These Goals are 10 years away and it is the children of now who will inherit the dream – as long as it has not turned into a nightmare on the way.

This is why the Day of the African Child is so important. It is a reaffirmation of the dreams of African children everywhere and a reaffirmation of our commitment to ensure that these dreams are fulfilled.

But in what context do the children dream? For a minority, the possibility of achieving their dreams is very high. They go to school, they are supported by their parents and/or their guardians, they have access to the services and amenities they require. For many others, it is a struggle to achieve their dream but their determination is high and they will not accept 'no' for an answer. They don't have all the services and support it is their right to have but they will not be deterred by that. They will go on struggling until they achieve that dream.

But for many, many others, that dream is so distant as to seem like a mirage in the desert. Unless we take strong, positive steps, that mirage will shimmer and disappear and they will not be able to take their place side by side with their fellow children and adolescents, and our dreams for them will turn into nightmares. The Millennium Development Goals will have become 'penalties' scored against them.

Orphans are a very good example of children whose dreams are as vulnerable as their lives. When the theme for the DAC was chosen, I am sure that those who chose it did so because orphans are a major part of Africa's population. It is now estimated that in Africa there are twenty million orphans. That is more than the population of many or most African states. In Ethiopia alone, there are about four and a half million orphans.

Again, that is higher than the total population of many African states. For Ethiopia itself it means that more than one child in every ten is an orphan.

In such a situation, the key issue is not to define the percentage of those orphaned by AIDS by comparison to those orphaned for other reasons. Any orphan has to face the trauma of losing one or both parents and many orphans have had to watch one or both parents die from other reasons as well. We know that HIV/AIDS is contributing to the rapid increase in the number of orphans, we know too that children orphaned by AIDS can face added stigma as a result and we have to address that added stigma but we need to recognise that all orphans are vulnerable, not just those orphaned by HIV and AIDS. They are all our collective responsibility.

However, the issue of children orphaned by AIDS, children made more vulnerable by AIDS, children having to live with HIV and AIDS should not make us forget why many of their parents were infected by HIV in the first place. In paying particular attention to those who have been made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS we should not forget that it was the vulnerability of many children and adolescents ... from orphanhood, but also from breakdown of families, physical and sexual abuse, living on the street, forced sex work etc) that facilitated and continues to facilitate the rapid spread of HIV especially among adolescent girls. Thus, HIV/AIDS is not just a cause of increasing vulnerability. It is the symptom, the fearful living testimony that we have not paid attention to the appalling vulnerability of so many children in the first place.

Let us take the example of adolescent girls. At the age of 12, probably less than 1% of them have been infected by HIV. But by the time they reach 18, as they leave childhood, as many as 20, 30 or even 50% of girls in some areas are infected. Does that not constitute an emergency? How many cases of cholera constitute an emergency? Or polio? Or measles? Either one or very few. And how many cases of HIV among adolescent girls constitute an emergency? It seems the number is uncountable. When we develop our national or agency budgets, when we revise our school curricula, when we develop the health plans for our peoples, when we allocate resources to social welfare and so on, is that emergency facing young girls even on the agenda?

And remember that of this 20, 30 or 50 percent of adolescent girls living with HIV, at least half will have had a baby in that time as the majority of African women have their first baby by the time they reach the age of 19, the majority of them inside marriage (and they were infected inside marriage as well). As they suffer and die from their own vulnerability, they are giving birth to a new generation of orphans.

It is no accident that it is the adolescent girls are the most infected group. They have the least education, the least access to resources, the least decision making power, the least everything. HIV takes full advantage of that. It strikes where there is inequality

and injustice. The less the rights of children are respected, protected and fulfilled, the more vulnerable they become ... and the less their dreams will be fulfilled.

That is why we have to strive to address vulnerability of children and adolescents. And, given the theme of the DAC for this year, 'African Orphans: Our Collective Responsibility', we have to strive to enable this vast population of twenty million orphans to achieve their dreams while orphanhood increases their vulnerability many times over. Even before they become orphans, they have to cope with the sickness of their parents and look after them as they die while facing the economic consequences of their parents' demise. Then they have to face the trauma of bereavement, often compounded by the treatment handed out to them after their parent's death. In happier times, they could (and many still can) count on traditional support but this vast number of orphans has stretched traditional support mechanisms to breaking point and families who take in the orphans have to use the few resources they have for their own children and the orphans as well. Many try valiantly to do so but in other cases the orphans are treated differently, or even exploited and abused. For many others too, orphanhood means entry into premature adulthood where they often have to make themselves more vulnerable in order to ensure a better life for their younger siblings.

And of course, especially for those orphaned by HIV/AIDS, there is the risk of having to face stigma and discrimination and denial of their rights to inheritance, to education and to health care.

So, I would like to change slightly the question I asked earlier in this speech? How many orphans constitute an emergency? What constitutes an emergency response? To give the example of Ethiopia, the national plan for OVCs estimates that about two hundred million dollars are required every year for ensuring that orphans too are able to access their rights. Of that, sixty million dollars are required for children orphaned by AIDS. Yet, currently, only ten million a year is allocated. The gap is huge.

Yet all these children have the right to dream, as much as any other child. And their dreams have to be heard, for one of the aspects of vulnerability is that there is no one to hear you anyway.

That is why I would like to use the opportunity to announce a new competition by UNICEF for all children in the country (and maybe other countries will pick up the theme as well). The competition is called

We have a dream ...

We would like children to tell us their dreams, in words, or pictures, or film. We would like to hear what they dream for their own lives, what they dream for their communities

and their country. What are their goals by 2015 when our dreams for them are supposed to be fulfilled? What can we do to ensure that the dream of every child is addressed? We would like particular efforts to be made to ensure that the most vulnerable children also tell us their dreams. We will inform them how they can send these to us so that their dreams can inform the debates of the new Ethiopian Parliament, and development of poverty eradication plans, and the ADF 5 on youth and leadership later this year and UNICEF's new global campaign on Children and AIDS.

The challenge is ours. Do we have the courage to face up to the dreams of our children and adolescents? Do we have the humility to listen to their dreams and allow them to inform our knowledge, our decisions and our policies? Do we have the wisdom to recognise that the countries of Africa are countries of young people and to allocate the resources required to the fulfilling of these dreams? For it is that courage and that wisdom which will make the millennium development goals a reality, their dreams will become the dreams of the nation and we can celebrate the DAC every day, for the dreams of the African Child and our dreams for the African Child will come together.