

STATEMENT

STATEMENT BY ETHIOPIAN OLYMPIC CHAMPION HAILE GEBRESELESSIE AT THE DOUBLE LAUNCH OF UNICEF'S GLOBAL "UNITE FOR CHILDREN:UNITE AGAINST AIDS" CAMPAIGN AND ETHIOPIA'S NATIONAL 'CAMPAIGN FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN, THURSDAY 25 OCTOBER

I apologise for being late. I am struggling to make my dream come true. I have not finished dreaming yet. That is why I am still exercising. I went to training and came back around 9:30.

Today – I am going to speak to my own people in Amharic – because this is important. As you know UNICEF and other NGOs – they did a lot of things here in Ethiopia. I would like to say thank you. Specially for UNICEF – for what they have done, what they are doing and for what they will do for Ethiopian children.

What is important now is – our own people – what we are doing. What we have done and what we need to do. That is very important.

(The following is translated from Amharic)

We are sitting here today to talk about the situation of children, and we can say many things. What he (Bjorn Ljungqvist, UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia) said earlier was to ask what my dream was. My dream was to be like Abebe Bikila and Miruts Yifter. That dream has become [reality]. But that doesn't mean that my dream is finished and has achieved its ultimate success.

Now in order to make the dreams of other children come true, as Ethiopians, what is it that we have to do? Or do we want them to grow up under the care of nannies who have come from other countries? Sometimes when we think about it, UNICEF is becoming like a nanny from abroad for our children. It is when we start to forget this that we started forgetting our own children.

What is expected of us as Ethiopians?

It is not that we each have to feed or clothe every single child. There are many things that we can do for our children that don't go so far. And when I say 'for our children' I don't just mean those that we have given birth to. All of them – including the children living on the street – are our children. We do not know who they will become tomorrow. Leaders, doctors, pilots could emerge from among them. If they become doctors they can heal and operate and do many things for us. If they become pilots they will be responsible for carrying our lives into the air with them. So what do we have to do for these children?

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There is a saying. A king and his son were traveling on the road. I will never forget that fable. It reflects my thinking on children. A man came across [the king and son] and greeted the son exceedingly well – but didn't pay much attention to the king. Then the king was upset and asked, 'How come you have honored my first born son, who may or not be king, with such a lavish greeting and not me?' And you know how the man responded? He said, 'Your Majesty, you have already become king and we have gotten to know you and the way that you administer the land. We don't doubt that you will do anything different. However, we do not know what this child will do when he grows up.'

Therefore, because they are the future, what must we do for children? – because we do not know what these children will become. From now onwards, for all the children that we meet, we must not just give them money and change. We need to advise them when they do wrong. We need to support them when they fall on bad times – just as if they were our own children. We love our own children – each one of us when we return to our homes – we show our children love. We need to learn how to treat these other children as if they were our own. We need to support them to achieve their dreams.

As you may know, a child who loses his mother or his father in the countryside – they will be able to live a good life, embraced by their community in the rural areas. I believe that this type of thing is disappearing in urban areas. All of you, especially those of you who have come from the rural areas know it. If a child loses his mother or father, members of the community will get the child to help on their farm – in fact they are treated with special care because they are orphans – their parents have died. But now we see their numbers growing on the streets and it is reaching frightening levels. The way that we are going to reduce this problem is not by ignoring it. As much as possible we need to help these children achieve their dream.

In Ethiopia today more than half the population is made up of children. The other day we were out at a march and I heard people saying, 'what kind of march is this – full of children?' We realized that we had forgotten something - that the largest segment of the population in Ethiopia are children – whether we like it or not it is children. There is something that has been forgotten by us, by the society and the government. There is a Ministry of Youth in Ethiopia but is there a Ministry of Children? We have not even realized that we need to establish a Ministry exclusively for children. We have a long way to go. That is something that we have to realize.

As Ethiopians, what I would like to say is that our children should not have to be raised by nannies from abroad. If we raise them ourselves then we will be able to guide them – they will retain our traditions and culture, they can grow up in a good way.

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One of the reasons that I am here today is to support the dream teams as part of the Great Ethiopia Run. UNICEF is doing a great job with the run every single year. I have not come here today to say that UNICEF has done this or said this or created this. I have come just to say what I must say and move on. And for the future – the population – as we are Ethiopians, please, all of us, those of us who are here and at home, if there are ten people here – next month they could have reached and influenced 100 people. This is what I have to say. Thank you very much.