

Speech by Richard Mabala, Head of UNICEF Ethiopia's Youth,
Protection and HIV/AIDS Section at the Global Launch of Unite
for Children: Unite Against AIDS and the National Launch of the
Campaign for Vulnerable Children.

Africa Hall, ECA

25 October 2005

The Global Campaign being launched today talks about children as the Missing Face of AIDS. Maybe we could talk about the missing faces, or even the invisible faces. Instead the faces have been turned into staggering statistics, huge numbers that we throw around in our speeches, xxx infected every minute, yyy orphans, zzz numbers of children needing treatment, etc. And as we stand and pronounce the statistics, they continue to get bigger so that our next speech will have to revise the statistics up once again.

And because the statistics are so big, just like a hurricane Katrina or a tsunami, or an earthquake, they can actually disempower us as we are overcome by a sense of helplessness. How can we ever hope to deal with such a situation? Where do we start? How can we find the resources?

And yet each one of these statistics dreams, just like you and I dream. In our case, our dreams inspire us to action. We are here today, because we dreamed, and we determined to fulfil our dreams, and we had many, many people who supported our dream, our parents and communities, social services, the writers of the books we read etc. etc. And we continue to dream, even if in my case and the case of many of my age, we might dream of what might have been, of opportunities missed, of what we would like to have done differently. But it is too late. What we did we did and now we tailor our dreams to the reality of our ageing legs and minds. And in the case of a few of us like Dr. Haile Gebreselassie, the fulfilment of our dreams serves as an inspiration to a new generation.

But still we dream. The MDGs are our dream not so much for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren. Meeting the MDGs is answering their dreams too.

For children dream differently. And their dreams have no boundary fences and mine fields ... Mahlet, the little girl in your briefing pack, wants to be a pilot, in spite of the fact that she now has to cook for and look after her family after her father's death and her mother's sickness. Every child you meet dreams of going to school and making a better life for themselves and their families. Gete Minale dreams of becoming a teacher and teaching others, people who live on the street. 'If I finish my education, I would like to be able to say 'I was once like you'. I would tell them to be like me'. It may be different from Ato Hailegebreselassie but his dream is to inspire others to make a good life for themselves.

But just like ourselves, Mahlet and Gete need support; they need the supportive environment in which they can fulfil their dreams. And the good news is that there are many adults too who refuse to be put off by the magnitude of the task. Part, or all of their dream is to fulfil the dreams of others. For example I was in Amhara last week. In just 3 days I saw:

A man who has given up his job, with his whole family. He makes things happen. He has built a centre with the trees he planted in order to provide a better life for orphans. He has become an inspiration to his entire community and continues to reach out to the vulnerable children and youth in that community. And he does not even come from that community.

I saw an iddir which is looking after 30 orphans, providing them with food and schooling, because every member of that contributes 1 birr a month and convinces the better off to contribute more. It seems very small but for those 30 orphans it makes all the difference.

I saw a youth group which protects very young girls from the rural areas who are cheated when they come to town and forced into sex work. Through their action, the pimps who were doing this are now in prison. These groups and individuals are all making a serious difference in the lives of the vulnerable children for whom this global campaign has been started.

That is why the National OVC Task Force, with the support of UNICEF has put in place this campaign for vulnerable children. It is very simple.

First we have to hear their dreams: for the last 3 months, a competition has been going on for children to express their dreams in writing, or pictures, or photographs, and we have made particular efforts to hear the dreams of the most vulnerable, the orphans, the children living and sleeping and working on the street, the child domestic workers etc. Young people have gone out, and talked to the children and given them the space to articulate their dreams. You can see some of the results in the exhibition outside.

This is very important for it is not so easy to hear their dreams as we go about our lives. Just outside this compound, there are small boys who want to shine our shoes. We often see them as a nuisance, they interfere with our busy lives ... and yet their dream shines out in each shoe ... Similarly, every child who stops us on the road also has a dream and when you talk to them, you sense their disappointment and frustration that as we go past we only see the rags and the outstretched hand, not the dreams beneath the rags.

Secondly, once we have heard those dreams we have to find ways of making them a reality. The campaign for vulnerable children intends to do this in two ways.

Running for the Dream. We have negotiated with the Great Ethiopian Run that this year, we don't just run (or walk in my case) for fun. We run for their dream and if we walk, we really walk the talk. So here in Ethiopia on 27th November we have our own Dream Team to raise money for supporting these children and the iddirs and AACs and

organisations and individuals who dream with and for these children. For 200 birr, one orphan can get a decent life for a month. For 2400 birr an orphan can have a decent life for a year. For 3000 birr, the orphan can also go to school. If 1000 runners raise 3000 birr each, that means that 1000 orphans can go to school and have a good life for a year. Already we have 200 dream team members and anyone who is registered can join the team. Even if you have not registered we still have a few places. We also have 2000 young people, from different youth groups supporting vulnerable children running too to raise money for those children they support. And vulnerable children will be running with them.

Fulfilling the dream. Of course, we are not going to meet the rights and needs of all these children just by running. But also, by running, we are showing commitment and asking everyone else to show commitment to vulnerable children. We are raising the profile of these children so that all institutions in society, government, NGOs, religions, donors, ensure that the missing faces are no longer missing opportunities but can grow to fulfil the dreams and the dreams of their communities.

In this way, we begin to form an alliance for ... and with ... vulnerable children. An alliance of iddirs, and NGOs, and churches and mosques, and business people and parliamentarians, and government officials and donors, an alliance that is expressed in the deliberate allocation of resources to ensuring that no child goes missing, and every child can attain their dream. For to attain their dream, they need schools, they need health facilities, they need trained teachers and health workers, they need support structures in their communities.

In the post-independence decades of the 1960s and 70s, some of Africa's great leaders such as Nyerere and Nkrumah used to say that Africans cannot be free until the whole of Africa is free. They knew that their own freedom was under threat until all Africans had the same freedom. They dared to dream and live that dream until it became a reality. Now I would argue a similar case within our countries. Our dreams and the dreams of our children cannot be fulfilled until the dreams of all are fulfilled. And things only happen because people make them happen.

So we are asking everyone to join the campaign, in their own kebeles and iddirs, in their work places and places of worship. We can all join the Dream Team and here in Ethiopia show how the campaign which is being launched globally can be turned into concrete results. Then, next year, when we meet to plan even stronger support through the 2006 Great Ethiopian Run, we will not speak about the numbers and the problems but about the children whose dreams have been fulfilled through our joint efforts. Their smiles will be our greatest reward.

Kiburat inna kiburan, watt'atoch inna lijjooh

Tinnish amarigna inaggeralihoo gin be amarigna menagger ifalligalihou.

Hoolachinnim hilm allen. Gin betam bezoo lijjooh inna watt'atoch welaj yatt'u lijjooh allou. Hilmachewihoon ihoon madreg yaschegerachewal. Selazee hoolachinnim hilmachihoon ihoon le madreg halafinet allebin.

Hilmochachewin addamt'oollachew
Hilmochachewin simoollachew
Lehilmochachew root'oollachew
Hilmochachewin ammwaloollachew

Hoolachehin rasachinin innitayik

Min mesrat ichilallihoo

Indechristian
Indemoselim
Indemengist balisilt'an
Indeparlama abal
Indemikrbeyt abal
Indeigazetegna
Indehibreteseboo abal
Indewett'at

Inde UNICEF serrategna, weyyim UNAIDS, weyyim WFP, weyyim UNDP lelam lelam

Mikniyatoom

Hilmachewin Lemasakat
Lijoch timhirt yafelligachewall
Tenachew indeet'ebbek yifelligaloo
Fik'r inna ink'k'ibikabey yafelligachewall

Yemminiserachew negeroch liyyoonnet yamet'alloo
Welaj yatt'u lijjooh inna hits'انات inna watt'atoch ignan yifallegaloo