

17 October 2002

STATEMENT BY UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE IBRAHIM JABR INAUGURAL ETHIOPIAN TEENAGER FORUM

Good morning everybody. I am very, very, very happy to be with you.

I should say this is the first forum -- the first forum ever organised by teenagers for themselves in Ethiopia. And I am very, very happy to see that UNICEF is not holding the forum. UNICEF is supporting you to run that forum. So again, congratulations to all of you. This is a wonderful achievement. To me what you have done today, and what you are going to do, is exactly what the Special Session on Children that was held last May meant: children, youth and adolescents in the driver's seat. It is not teenagers to come and sing a song or to say, "Yes or we agree to what the older people are saying." It is actually saying, "We teenagers, we decide on what the future of children is all about." Again, my congratulations to you.

This, I understand, is the first in a series of three workshops that you are going to have. You teenagers are concerned about the present and future of children. The theme of this workshop today has been your choice. Fifty teenagers from 15 schools have decided to come together and discuss one topic in a practical and pragmatic way, the way you see things and the way you want them to evolve from that.

Your theme today is HIV/AIDS. That's no surprise. This is your worry, and our worry, every day when we open our eyes in the morning, and we go to bed at night. This is the future of Ethiopia. This is your future and your present. What you decide today will affect today and tomorrow for Ethiopia. So I cannot underline more than what I have said about your role in this. Again, this is your workshop. Make it your workshop. Come with the results that you yourselves decide are the best for you and for this country. I want to assure you that UNICEF will always be with you. We will never tell you, "Do this or do that." You will tell us, "This is how we see things, and this is how we would like you to support us."

So please just make sure that you stay in the driver's seat. I am not alone here. I have Dr. Bulti who is from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Dr. Bulti was part of the delegation that went to the Special Session on Children last May. That delegation also had youth from Ethiopia. So Dr. Bulti will also listen to you the way I plan to listen to you. Dr. Bulti will take the results of your work today seriously as much as I will. We are very much all ears and eyes for you and what you are going to achieve today. Do not put any brakes on your ideas. Use your experience, your insight, your realism and your commitment as a driving force for today.

A very important thing is that everyday we come across somebody who lives with this virus, whether that person is HIV-positive or that person has full-blown AIDS. How do we behave towards that person? He or she is certainly a young person like you. They have the same aspirations, but they have a difference. They wake up in the morning and say, Am I still alive? Do I have a future? To what can I aspire? Am I like the others? Do I go to school? Can I go to a health centre? Can I play with people my own age? Can I share ideas? Can I share hopes?

I think it is you that will say, “Yes, these people also are young people like us. They have the right to dream. They have the right to live. They have the right to get what we all get.” And I think you will play an immediate and an important role in making that happen. I think we all have to fight that stigmatisation – “Oh, I could not touch somebody HIV-positive.” Why not? “Oh, I cannot drink with somebody HIV-positive.” Why not? There is no reason for this. They are like us. They have our rights. They have our aspirations. And I beg you to look clearly into this thing.

I will not hold this from you: Yesterday I had the honour to have an audience with His Holiness, Patriarch Abune Paulos. We are also trying together to see how the main religious institutions as a group can emphasise that religion, in essence, is about tolerance, and stigmatisation, especially when it come to HIV/AIDS, is against religion. I think everybody will have to do something about HIV/AIDS. My boss tells me if I do not spend 50 percent of my time and resources on HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia, I will have failed in your function. And I agree with him. I think it is our time, our money and our ideas that we need to invest today in what we are going to do.

I am not going to take much of your time, just to tell you that we are all with you. UNICEF is with you. But we do not want to be in the driver’s seat. You are in the driver’s seat today, and I hope you will remain in the driver’s seat. Come up with ideas that you want, and we will support you. Be bold. Think as committed teenagers, and nobody can stop you.

Good luck. Thank you very much.