

**SPECIAL COHSOD ON CHILDREN
SPEECH
UNICEF REGIONAL DIRECTOR, NILS KASTBERG
MARCH 17- 19, 2008
Georgetown, Guyana**

**Mr. Chairman,
H.E. the Secretary General of the Caribbean Community
Honourable Ministers
Distinguished Delegates
Colleagues Representatives from Regional and International
Organisations
Staff of the Secretariat of the Caribbean Community
Representatives of the Media, to those of you representing youth media
Ladies and Gentlemen**



It gives me particular pleasure to address this Special COHSOD. It is *special* by the nature of its focus -- Our children of the Caribbean. It is *special* by nature of its ultimate goal – Building a Region Fit for Children. Most of all, this special session represents our collective conviction that a truly prospering and humane region requires holistic investments in its children and their rights.

The vision and framework for this are anchored in work initiated at the first special COHSOD meeting, undertaken together here in 2002. A lot has been achieved since then -- real results with significant impact and improvement in the six areas of the agreed Regional framework of Action for Children; early childhood development, child protection, HIV/AIDS, education, infant and maternal mortality. We are here to assess achievements made and identify the gaps that have yet to be filled in those areas. We are also here to take note of a changing landscape with its own set of new, sometimes troubling, collective challenges. Issues like increased levels of violence against children and climate change, and the ever increasing impact it has on our children, our development and, in certain cases, the threat posed to the very existence of some of our small island states.

As such, the reflection and stocktaking at this special COHSOD are not only constructive they are also timely.

It is fair to say we are at a crossroads – just past the halfway to 2015, halfway to the marker we have set for ourselves globally through our universal framework, the Millennium Development Goals. In fact, governments from the Caribbean, and from around the world, will gather in New York in September to review progress in progressing towards the Millennium Development Goals. The challenge there, as it is here, is to look at the goals we have set and critically assess how well we are doing living up to the commitments made to our children and adolescents.

We will have a passionate, and no doubt inspiring, summary from the young people themselves, attending this special session as youth journalists. We look forward to the broadcast they will present delegates tomorrow.

Our challenge is to be as blunt with ourselves as they will be with us about the road traveled and the road ahead. Without taking anything away from significant achievements, we continue to face intractable and disturbing issues in the Caribbean; the unacceptable levels of violence that afflict our children and adolescents, in their homes and in their schools, where the character of violence has its own gender dimension. The Caribbean ranks first, globally, when it comes to murder rates. It also suffers the highest rates of homicides among 15 – 17 years old, where boys are six

times as likely to be victims, than are girls. The face of violence for girls is the face of a young girl, too often a victim of rape, sexually abused at home by her father or another adult male in the household. This is in part, why Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole have the 2nd highest rate of teenage pregnancies in the world. There remain continued challenges on HIV/AIDS in a region that continues to have the 2nd highest prevalence rates in the world.

The proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons is a major factor behind the violence plaguing countries across the region. The Caribbean and Latin America presents the highest rate of armed violence in the world – 42% of all homicides globally. Just two weeks ago representatives from across the Caribbean met in Jamaica, to assess the human impact of this troubling statistic: the devastating and often unquantifiable price paid by children and their communities. I draw your attention to the report the technical teams discussed in Kingston, and I share with delegates here on small arms and light weapons.

The long term value of this special COHSOD will be gauged by the continued political commitment to follow up at the national and regional level. Indeed we've seen what can be achieved through our collective efforts.

Regional achievements that merit our attention include:

On Early Childhood Development

- In 2006 in response to the recommendations of the Caribbean Regional Early Childhood Policy Forum, held in Kingston on 22nd-23rd March, 2006, CARICOM established an Early Childhood Development Working Group to examine the relationships between early childhood development and poverty reduction, early childhood development and human capacity development and early childhood development and social vulnerabilities. The recommendations of the Forum led to the adoption by of a ten point action plan for support to advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge generation, parenting and the development of policy, standards and regulatory frameworks in the region. The development of an Early Childhood Development Minimum Service Standard providing a mechanism for harmonisation across the region. CARICOM is being supported in the development of indicators and a framework for monitoring the development of early childhood services and in particular to track access of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children to quality early childhood development services in Member States.
- Given the remarkable commitment of Governments and development partners, the Eastern Caribbean countries have achieved universal access to life skills/HFLE. UNICEF and its partners have also been able to generate considerable knowledge and support capacity building in HFLE.
- In addition, the regional HFLE Curriculum Framework was expanded to include a wider age range - 5 to 16 years. This is important not only in the prevention of HIV/AIDS but also positive socialization, respect for gender equality, self-esteem enhancement and conflict resolution skills amongst adolescents.

On Child Protection

- In the area of Child Protection, with support from various partners and UNICEF, the CARICOM Secretariat has been instrumental in designing and building a regional coordination mechanism for children, in coherence with national and regional priorities and global commitments. The OECS Law Reform process is another example of the efforts made in the sub-region to harmonize legal frameworks with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other Human Rights Covenants. The idea, and importance of, a protective environment for children, addressing issues such as the right to an identity, justice for children, sexual and emotional abuse of children, promoting alternative and positive disciplinary methods and emerging issues such as trafficking and migration.

On HIV/AIDS

- The 2007 UNAIDS epidemic update shows there has been a real decline in the rate of new HIV infections in some countries, and in many countries the epidemic has stabilized.
- The Caribbean has shown notable progress in the coverage of treatment and care. Several Caribbean countries have reported near universal access to anti retroviral treatment for women and for pediatric AIDS, even though overall it is only 50% of the people in need of treatment who access it. This is still high by world standards. However more efforts need to be deployed in preventive interventions.
- However HIV prevalence rates in young people range from 0.08% to 3.2%. Young people have yet to adopt consistently safer sex behaviors; have difficulty accessing sexual, reproductive and HIV health services; and young women in particular are subject to pressures for intergenerational and/or transactional sex. Forced sexual debut is an issue affecting approximately 20% of young people. UNICEF is committed to support this region in implementing prevention programmes that target young people and adolescents.
- The new Caribbean Regional Strategic Framework 2008-2012 takes a more country-centred approach, recognising that success in individual country programmes is essential for overall regional success in achieving Universal Access to prevention, treatment, care and support. We are pleased to note that this time issues concerning children and young people, orphans and other vulnerable children have been given prominence and UNICEF will continue to provide support in its implementation.

One of the areas not covered in the Framework for Building a Region fit for Children, but inherently crucial to doing so, is the area of positive adolescent development. In 2007 UNICEF Belize assumed focal point responsibility for Sub- Regional Adolescent Development under the mechanism established to advance coordination among UNICEF offices in the Caribbean. This has resulted in the establishment of a strong partnership on adolescent and Youth Development with CARICOM which places UNICEF in a strategic position to advance the regional adolescent and youth development agenda.

Some key outcomes of this partnership with CARICOM include:

- Collaborating with CARICOM to conduct a Regional Situation Analysis of Caribbean Adolescent and Youth for presentation to the Heads of Government in July 2008. UNICEF is undertaking the analysis of the 10-14 age cohort which also includes a social spending analysis on adolescent and youth by governments in the region
- UNICEF currently chairs the CARICOM Interagency Steering Committee on Adolescent and Youth Development which comprises of representatives from key international agencies, CARICOM and selected Youth Directors. The committee was established to provide technical assistance and coordination for the implementation of the Regional Strategy for Youth Development
- Through this partnership UNICEF also provided technical support for the convening of a Regional Youth Directors Meeting and the 2007 COHSOD on Youth and Culture which promoted the utilization of the Life Cycle approach to planning and programming for adolescents and youth.

An issue of particular interest to Guyana's President, and of critical importance to us all, are the effects of climate change – on our children, in emergencies and to development gains.

The implications are that children born today and going through school in the next 18 years will emerge as productive adults in a world profoundly altered by climate change. They will not only become familiar with water shortage, food insecurity, poor sanitation and health but also with the *major consequences* of these impacts for the potential acceleration of migration, conflict, poverty, social and economic instability.

The hurricane season struck with particular ferocity this year, uncharacteristically beginning with two consecutive category 5 hurricanes. Development gains in countries such as Jamaica and Belize, risk being undermined as long as the vulnerability of small states is linked to their capacity to recover from natural disasters.

The experience of Grenada struck by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 is salutary in this regard: at the time of the strike Grenada's economy was on a course to experience an economic growth rate of approximately 5.7% per annum through 2007 but negative growth of around -1.4% per annum is now forecast for the next several years.

For this reason it is important to identify the kind of initiatives that are needed for protecting and supporting children across a wide range of potential emergencies. In addition, it is important to go further and to anticipate the needs of children for preparing for a very different world from the one which we currently inhabit. For this reason, a session at the Special COHSOD on Children will focus on the need to programme for children affected not only by emergencies but also by the long term effects of climate change.

As we monitor our collective countdown to 2015, a key area for consideration in this region as elsewhere, is how results translate to subregional and community levels. National averages have a way of hiding serious disparities. In fact, the term 'tyranny of averages' has been coined to capture this inequity. The tyranny of averages hides the reality of thousands of our region's children that are disadvantaged by their background, geographic location, socio-economic milieu or by their disabilities. The lack of disaggregated data also hides powerful gender evidence around the realities faced by boys and girls in the Caribbean.

CARINFO, JAMSTATS and HELENINFO, are important examples and best practice in the use of DEVINFO and NPA INFO for data management in within the Caribbean Countries and countries of the OECS. Where disaggregated data is available, it reveals the extent of significant structural and systemic inequalities.

For example:

- **In Guyana**, while more than 90 percent of people use an improved source of drinking water, disparities between the coast and the interior is quite large (96 percent for the coast and 52 percent in the interior).
- **In Suriname** only 6 percent of children aged 12 - 18 in the two interior districts attend secondary school, compared to 54 percent nation wide.
- **In Belize:**
 - Child malnutrition, leading to a life-long chronic condition manifested as stunting has a national prevalence of 18%. In indigenous populations 44% of children under five are affected.
 - MICS 3 data while confirming a net primary attendance rate of 95.2 per cent at the primary level, (which bodes well for Belize's achievement of this MDG), indicated clear geographic and socio-economic disparities, including in the transition rate of poor children from the primary to secondary level.
 - A Caribbean study in four countries including Belize points also to a significant gender disparity that sees more boys repeat in the primary levels and drop out in far greater number at the secondary level. Double digit repetition rates in excess of ten percent, with much higher rates at the lower grades and a doubling in poor communities, cost the Government approximately \$4 million each year.
 - 30% national participation in Early Childhood Education, going down to less than one per cent of children in the poorest, indigenous communities, benefiting from ECE.

It's a daunting countdown to 2015. This meeting is an important step along the road. We welcome the efforts at updating the regional action plan at creating a Caribbean that is Region Fit for Children, as we welcome a mechanism to monitor its implementation and progress. That CARICOM should create a platform for this kind of focused discussion signals the commitment of each of you, we welcome the political will and are ready to tirelessly support in making your Declaration and your plan – a reality for the children and adolescents in the Caribbean. We know that inspired leadership makes all the difference in putting an action plan into reality. UNICEF is ready to support your efforts at making this COHSOD a milestone for our children.

I wish you inspired deliberations.