

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

'Working Together: UNICEF and the NGO Community'
At the Dialogue and Luncheon between UNICEF and Malaysian NGOs

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"By giving high priority to the rights of children, to their survival and to their protection and development, we serve the best interest of all humanity."

Dato' – dato', Datin – datin,

Distinguished Guests,

Members of the Media,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning,

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you all today at this special dialogue and luncheon today.

I would especially like to express my sincere thanks to the Malaysian Child Resource Institute, for all their hard work in organising this event. It is no mean feat to bring so many partners from such a wide range of experiences to this dialogue. Indeed UNICEF is most grateful for the on-going collaboration with the Malaysian Child Resource Institute which has hosted a number of these events in the past when a new UNICEF representative has come into position. Of course, it was hoped that we would meet some months ago when I arrived in Malaysia, but as ever the schedule became extremely busy. Nonetheless, it is very pleasing to see so many children's NGOs stakeholders here and I very much welcome this opportunity to get to know you better today.

UNICEF and how it has evolved

You may all be familiar with the term UN or UNICEF, as seen on television or in the newspapers, but I would like to present in a few words this organisation's mandate. As you may know, the **United Nations (UN)** is an inter-governmental organisation founded in 1945 in order to stop wars between nations and to provide a platform for a dialogue on human rights. After the devastation of World War II, children in Europe faced famine and disease. As a response, the newly founded United Nations body created a special agency in December 1946 to provide food, clothing and health care to them. This new agency was called the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund or UNICEF for short. For many years thereafter, UNICEF focused on emergency relief in under-developed countries, ensuring children's basic survival needs.

In many regions of the world, UNICEF continues this important mandate. As you will surely be aware, in countries such as Sudan, Myanmar, and North Korea, children's lives are still in jeopardy every day. Indeed, closer to home, it is still true that all countries in this region, especially those neighbouring Malaysia, are affected by repeated natural disasters as well as civil unrest and conflict.

Whether they are growing up in countries affected by natural disasters, civil conflict and war, or in countries with poor governance and oppression, children may still – even in the year 2008 – not have the basic essentials of food, shelter and clean drinking water to survive. UNICEF contributes to securing these basic needs through its programs. For example, in Burundi in 2001, “days of tranquility” were negotiated, when temporary ceasefire was agreed upon to enable the safe passage of health workers to reach children during conflicts with immunisations, vitamin A supplementation and other child health interventions. Moreover, when peace returns, children are among the first beneficiaries, as schools and health clinics reopen and immunisation programs restart. In Liberia and Nepal, UNICEF advocated for ‘Schools as Zones of Peace’. Schools were designated as safe havens and UNICEF provided children affected by the conflict with “school in a box” materials to ensure the continuation of children's education in emergencies. These boxes contained the basic school supplies, such as exercise books, pencils, erasers and scissors.

Over the years, as countries have achieved their Millennium Development Goals in terms of health, education, infant and maternal survival, so UNICEF's mandate has evolved. In many countries, especially middle income countries like Malaysia, there has been an increasing emphasis on the realisation of a full package of child rights that extend way beyond the basic rights to survival.

In many of these countries, there are still children who are discriminated against because of their race, gender, disability or HIV status. Whilst they have more chance today of surviving to adulthood than 25

years ago, they still do not receive equal treatment under national laws and policies. For many, the disparity or gap between ‘children who have’ and ‘children who have-not’ is increasing. These groups of marginalised children remain far more vulnerable to abuse, neglect, trafficking, sexual exploitation, child labour and recruitment into armed forces.

The reality of the global picture can be clearly demonstrated by the following alarming statistics:

- 29,000 children die every day (that is 10 million children per year) from preventable diseases such as malaria. A further 5000,000 children under the age of 15 died of HIV/AIDS in 2007.
- An estimated 126 million children aged 5-17 are employed in hazardous labour.
- More than 2 million child soldiers were killed, while some 6 million children were permanently disabled or seriously injured during conflicts around the world between 1995 and 2005.

The Mandate of UNICEF

In the past decades, there has been a strengthened understanding of children as ‘rights-holders’. Essentially this means that they, like adults, are entitled to protection of the same kinds of rights. To this end, UNICEF’s work for the overall protection of childhood is now guided by the principles and standards established in the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**.

This international convention, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989 in New York, set out – for the first time – the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. This ground-breaking document recognises that specific measures needed to be taken, and specific rights protected, if children, the most vulnerable category of people, are to achieve their fundamental human rights. According to this convention, the basic human rights to which children everywhere are entitled include:

- the right to survival
- the right to develop to the fullest
- the right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation
- the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life

It is important to understand that, since its adoption in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (known as the CRC) has become more than just a reference, but rather a systematic guide to the work of UNICEF. As expressed in its Mission Statement, UNICEF is mandated to “advocate for the protection of children’s rights”, and the agency “strives to establish children’s rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children”.

It should be noted that the CRC is the first ever human rights treaty which grants a role in its implementation to a specialised United Nations agency, and in this case, UNICEF. As a result, the CRC provides UNICEF with guidance on the child rights violations that need to be assessed and addressed, and it is a tool against which UNICEF measures the progress achieved in reversing the violation. In the approximately 160 countries where UNICEF has a presence on the ground, the agency works with government, communities and individuals to respect those rights, promoting full compliance with, and implementation of, the CRC. As well as the provision of essential services, especially in times of crisis, UNICEF promotes child rights through a number of ways, including:

1. Advocacy:

UNICEF's **advocacy role** focuses on working with those responsible for the development and implementation of legislation and policy. This requires forging relationships with key policy makers in government ministries and departments responsible for the wellbeing and protection of children.

In terms of promoting societal change, UNICEF may also support advocacy campaigns through publications, awareness raising activities and exposure to good models of practice.

A classic example of this advocacy role has been seen in the response to the former UN Secretary-General's report on Violence against Children. In 2005, recognising that violence against children was endemic in many countries around the world, in contravention of the CRC provisions under Article 19, the UN Secretary initiated a worldwide study of the phenomenon. Whilst all countries in this region have ratified the Convention, few have enacted legislation to protect children from violence.

The recommendations of the study stated that national legal frameworks need to be brought into line with the provisions of the CRC, namely that violence and beatings in the home, corporal punishment in schools, and caning of children in detention should be prohibited. Since the report was launched in 2006, there has been a notable response to develop laws and policies to protect children, promoting conformity with CRC international requirements.

2. Technical assistance

Of course, it is a sad reality that compliance with international law and standards is unlikely to be sustained if there is no monitoring process. In order to maximise compliance, UNICEF provides **technical support** to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. This Committee monitors implementation of the CRC by States parties.

UNICEF is given a special role under the Convention with respect to monitoring. In addition to contributing advice and assistance to the Committee, UNICEF facilitates broad consultations within States to develop the report and to strategise with the concerned government to implement the Committee's recommendations.

3. Partnerships with NGOs

UNICEF plays its role through partnership with governments and civil society to enhance efforts for the realisation of children's rights, especially in the areas of health, HIV, education and child protection.

As you may know, in May 2002, more than 7,000 people participated in the most important international conference on children for a decade, held at the United Nations in New York. At this Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Children, the nations of the world gathered to review progress since the World Summit for Children in 1990 and re-energise global commitment to children's rights. The Special Session culminated in the official adoption, by some 180 countries, of its outcome document, "A World Fit for Children"¹. This document represents an international commitment to a series of twenty-one goals and targets to improve the situation of children and young people. There are 4 key priorities:

- The promotion of health
- The provision of quality education for all
- The protection against abuse, exploitation and violence
- The combat of HIV/AIDS

These specific priorities are especially significant as they are key benchmarks to measure the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals, agreed nearly nine years ago, and which provide the framework for reducing poverty and envision a world in which all children can achieve their rights to survive, grow and develop to their full potential.

As I am sure you will all recognise, moving from principle to practice remains a challenge. In order to achieve the agreed commitments, various UN agencies, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), were mandated to support governments to turn the goals into reality. This can only be achieved through strong and sustained partnership with civil society to enhance efforts for the realisation of children's rights. It is for this reason that UNICEF places such importance on the initiative spoken of earlier to ensure CRC compliance and reporting mechanisms.

During 2008, we have partnered with many of your agencies represented here today. As you would see from the annual work-plan, there is a key strategy area called 'Sustainable Partnership'. This program is based upon the premise that UNICEF will engage with a range of actors, government and NGO, to ensure effective change for children. UNICEF in Malaysia is not a typical office, in that UNICEF staff are not based in the field, rather we work through key allies and partners who are themselves able to implement projects.

¹ Resolution A/S-27/2, 11 October 2002

For example, recent UNICEF – NGO collaborations have included:

1. Training programs in collaboration with MERCY Malaysia to increase capacity of 60 specialist teachers to prepare for and respond to situations of emergency.
2. Development of child rights programming training with MCRI, as well as support for the development of CRC reporting mechanisms.
3. Advocacy work in collaboration with the Malaysian Aids Council to review the situation of children affected by HIV.
4. The development of guidelines for NGO shelter homes and care centres.

These partnerships are essential to our on-going work and we hope to develop more strategic cooperation in 2009.

UNICEF in Malaysia

UNICEF has been working in partnership with the Government of Malaysia since 1954. As was seen in the recent UNICEF publication, 'The State of the World's Children 2008', Malaysia has made outstanding improvements in the well-being of children and is well on its way to achieve most of the Millennium Development Goals.

A long-term policy of economic growth with equity has resulted in a continuous decline in poverty rates, and the proportion of the population living in poverty had reduced to 5.7% in 2005. Infant and under-five mortality rates are reaching levels similar to those of fully developed countries. For the vast majority of children in Malaysia, childhood is a time of great learning, fun and freedom.

However, it is well documented that there still remain disparities in the lives of children living in Malaysia. Statistics show that some 7,000 children under five years old continue to die each year from preventable and treatable diseases while four percent of children are not enrolled in primary schools. These children are still left behind due to many factors, underpinned mainly by social, geographical and economic disparities. For example, children who live in rural areas, where access to schools, availability of trained teachers and educational supplies is more limited, still do not enjoy the same levels of opportunity as the others.

To address some of these persistent inequalities, in the last few years, UNICEF has been working closely with the Government, notably the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health, to comply with the recommendations of the CRC

Committee. In particular, this work aims to ensure the fulfillment of international legal commitments to guarantee equal access to education and protection for all children living in Malaysia.

Education

Education is the right of every child. Education is also a key factor in reducing poverty, early child labour, as well as the principal setting for promoting democracy, peace, tolerance and development. Yet, despite the commitments made, around the world more than 120 million children of primary school age – the majority of them girls – are not enrolled in school. Millions more are taught by untrained and underpaid teachers in overcrowded, unhealthy and poorly equipped classrooms. And one-third of all children do not complete five years of schooling, the minimum required for basic literacy.

A world fit for children is one in which all children get the best possible start in life and have access to a quality basic education, including primary education that is compulsory and available free to all. Since 2002, remarkable efforts have been made by governments, with the support of UN agencies and NGOs, to provide their children with education. As a result, the Millennium Development Goals Report (August 2008) shows that:

- In almost all regions, the net enrolment ratio in 2006 exceeded 90 per cent;
- The number of children of primary school age who were out of school fell from 103 million in 1999 to 73 million in 2006;
- The proportion of children in developing countries who have completed primary education raised from 79 per cent in 1999 to 85 per cent in 2006.

One reason why UNICEF attaches so much importance to education is that education is probably the most effective strategy to prevent children, especially those facing conflict and disaster, from child trafficking, child labour and sexual exploitation, becoming a child soldier and all forms of violence.

Malaysia has made tremendous strides to ensure that all children receive an education – as evidenced by the high budgetary investment by the government. However, there remains an approximately 4% of eligible children who either do not register for school or do not attend. In real figures this represents many thousands of children who are at risk of being left behind in a rapidly changing and academically-oriented society. Recent studies have also demonstrated that some Malaysian children living in remote areas are not achieving their potential in schools, and have lower enrollment and higher drop-out rates.

To address this disparity, UNICEF is working in partnership with the Ministry of Education on a project *Supplementary Reading Program for Remote Area Schools in Sabah and Sarawak*, initiated in 2004, focusing on quality literacy programs and increasing opportunity and access to education, as part of the Malaysian Education Development Plan. The Program is designed to develop enthusiasm in children for reading and literacy, encouraging them to enjoy learning and stay in school later into their teenage

years. The educational materials provided to the schools are used during the Supplementary Reading Camp where a total of 360 students from 30 Sabah schools and 90 students from 10 Sarawak schools come together. A wide range of carefully chosen books to motivate students' interest in reading are provided to be used in classrooms and libraries, and interactive computers further strengthen and develop their learning experiences to exciting educational activities.

Nevertheless, access to education itself is not sufficient for the well-being of children. Violence in the form of corporal punishment, such as beating and caning, is still reported in schools. This phenomenon remains widely accepted as an appropriate way to discipline pupils; however, the short and long-term repercussions of bullying and violence in schools has been shown to have long lasting and damaging impact on children's ability to study and enjoy their schooling.

In order to create safe schools that are fit for children, there now exists a specific cooperation between the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) and the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF), in collaboration with HELP College University, to implement "positive discipline" in schools. Following the example of other countries which have already banned this practice, such as Japan, Thailand and Cambodia, this program is designed to support teachers to manage conflict in the classroom and school setting, and to encourage alternative forms of discipline to the *rotan*. Truancy and drop-out rates have been found to be significantly reduced, and quality education enhanced, when physical chastisement and public humiliation are taken off the statute books.

Child Protection

It is a reality that international legal provisions and mechanisms strengthen the protection of children. For example, the universally agreed Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC-1989) and its Optional Protocols (2000) contain a comprehensive set of international legal standards for the protection and wellbeing of children.

Nevertheless, worldwide and at this very moment, hundreds of millions of children are suffering from violence, exploitation, neglect and other forms of domestic abuse and discrimination. Some of these children will be living with apparently respectable, professional parents in middle income countries; others may be street children living in dire poverty; or refugee or migrant children without documents. Such violence and abuse knows no socio-economic or ethnic boundaries; and every society is affected.

These children live under especially difficult circumstances, where pain and suffering have become their daily realities; abused, neglected, sold and trafficked, physically injured, emotionally traumatised, and many separated from their families and caregivers as a result of internal displacement, migration or as refugees.

We all recognise that a world fit for children is one in which all children and adolescents have equal opportunity to develop their individual potential in a safe and protected environment.

Accordingly, by adopting the document “A World Fit for Children”, nations resolved to implement strategies and actions to promote child protection and eradicate violence against children. Child protection is an issue that cuts across all sectors and is especially important to achieving the provisions of all the Millennium Development Goals, and fulfilling all the other rights:

- An immunised child who faces violence and abuse at home is not a healthy child.
- A child attending school but who is discriminated against and bullied due to her ethnic status will not achieve his/her educational potential.
- A healthy newborn who is not registered at birth will grow up invisible – and much more vulnerable to exploitation in the form of recruitment into child labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation.

However, it still remains a concern to UNICEF that, compared with their efforts in health and education provision, governments have generally devoted less resources, both human and financial, to protection issues, for which there are no Millennium Development Goal targets.

You may know that, whilst national budgets will often allocate on average 15-20% on education, welfare and protection services for children rarely exceed 1%. As UNICEF increasingly recognises, this can be a false economy as the **economic cost** of remedying the symptoms of socially marginalised, unproductive and disenfranchised teenagers and young adults, is significant. Extensive research from the USA and Australia has demonstrated the financial toll of child neglect, economic instability, poor education standards, and anti-social parenting. As well as the immediate costs of vagrancy, drug-related crimes and syndicated exploitation, the **welfare costs** of supporting families living on the periphery of society, supported in childcare homes and in detention are immense. It has been found that it costs a government 7 times more to remedy the child welfare problems than to prevent the problem in the first place.

HIV / AIDS

HIV in Malaysia is gaining a feminine face, with more women becoming infected through heterosexual transmission. Children will ultimately suffer because they become infected by their mothers and/or affected by AIDS.

In Malaysia:

- The numbers of newly-infected women have increased four-fold in the last 10 years.
- Close to 2,000 children below the age of 19 have tested HIV-positive.

- Beyond that, tens of thousands of children are living in homes shadowed with HIV, as a result of a family member's infection.

Three years ago, UNICEF and UNAIDS launched a global campaign on children and AIDS, called '**Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS**'. This campaign called for urgent action from everyone involved in the fight against AIDS, to strengthen the protective environment for children and ensure that the next generation of children is AIDS-free.

Parallel with UNICEF Malaysia's mission to protect children, this campaign focuses on four areas to stop HIV in its tracks: preventing primary infections, preventing mother-to-child-transmission, providing paediatric treatment, and providing protection, care and support to children affected by HIV.

By uniting against AIDS, we are calling for a grand alliance between all our partners, including the media, NGOs, government and religious leaders to meet the complex challenges posed by the epidemic. All these parties play a unique role in this alliance to end the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV and AIDS.

UNICEF Malaysia country office supported and facilitated a religious study tour to Indonesia hosted by the National AIDS Commission from 9-15 November 2008. The purpose of the study tour was to explore best practices of HIV response among the religious leaders. More specifically, given the Harm Reduction Programme that has been implemented in the last couple of years, it is vital to advocate to religious leaders in Malaysia on the prevention of HIV at all levels of the community, district and national programmes. It also seeks to strengthen the Ministry of Health's implementation of the Harm Reduction programme, which requires the collaboration of the Religious Department, JAKIM and State Level Muftis. The delegation consisted of government officials from the Ministry of Health, JAKIM under the Prime Minister's Department, as well as the Johor and Perak Muftis, who have been key decision makers in policies and programme development relevant to their respective communities.

Thank you.