Khan Younis/New York, 9 December 2004 - Sixteen-year old Mustafa lives in the Gaza Strip, where political conflict affects his daily life. “When I have an exam I just think about the political topics and I forget the exam and I have problems in my exams,” he says.

Mustafa was one of the young people who took part in an online webchat that marked the launch of The State of the World’s Children 2005. The webchat was organized by UNICEF’s Voices of Youth and the UK National Committee. UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy took part in the webchat and fielded a wide range of questions from the young participants.

Young people from Malaysia, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the UK and Nigeria talked to each other online about the key themes of this year’s report: poverty, HIV/AIDS and armed conflict. Ranging in age from 8 to 19, they talked about how these issues impacted their own lives, as well as how they affected young people in other parts of the world. They spoke from their own experiences and tried to come up with solutions. Amanda saw the effects of armed conflict first hand when she travelled to Iraq with a health organization in 2001.

“We went there on a mission with the First Lady. She said, ‘You guys say you know so much about people in Iraq – sometimes you just think you know something. So, you guys go there and know something and come back here and tell the world,” she said in an interview.

Several of the kids from the Gaza Strip live with armed conflict every day without leaving home. Mustafa is a member of a Gaza youth group called the Young Scientists Club. He sees poverty and a fear of violence affecting his community every day. “Many children cannot go to school and have education and health,” he says.

But for Mustafa and his friends in his community, the web chat with kids in Malaysia, Nigeria and the UK was an affirmation that talking to other people can often give an insight into what is going on in our own lives. He thinks these kinds of conversations may have a concrete effect. “I think they may help me to solve my problem,” he says.

Amanda, back in Malaysia, worries that even if kids around the world participate in political discussions like this, their ideas will still be ignored by adults. But she believes that the experience and knowledge of adults can enrich the fresh opinions of young people. “I heard of this statement which has stayed with me for quite some time,” she says. “It’s this: give a child a piece of paper and he’ll produce a painting, put the same child next to an adult and he’ll produce a masterpiece. It means that a child is capable of doing something so beautiful, but if you put the same child next to an adult who is more expert at doing something it can produce something even better.”

Amanda feels that The State of the World’s Children webchat should be the first of many. Now that they have laid out their concerns, she says, they should meet online again to come up with some strategies for change, on their own terms.