

# A vision for the 21st century

## An urgent call to leadership

As the 21st century begins, children and women are the overwhelming majority of the people in the world who live in poverty, who are killed and maimed in conflicts and who are most vulnerable to infection with HIV/AIDS. Their rights, as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, are violated every day in countless ways.

Government bodies and civil groups, organizations of the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations, philanthropies and responsible corporate citizens – as well as children and adolescents themselves – have formed alliances to redress these wrongs.

Ready to take the necessary next step in advancing the well-being of the world's children, representatives of these various organizations are to gather in an extraordinary meeting, in the New York autumn of 2001, that will be linked to a Special Session of the UN General Assembly. Together they will form a grand global coalition committed to fully meeting the goals of the 1990 World Summit for Children. And they will begin the 21st century with a new vision and a new commitment, clear and passionate about what needs to be done – for all women and all children – before the first decade of the new millennium ends.

Their vision is that all children live a full and healthy life, with rights secured and protected. And their commitment is that all infants start life healthy, all young children are nurtured in caring environments, all children, including the poorest and most disadvantaged, complete a basic education of good quality and that all adolescents have the opportunities to develop fully and participate in their societies.

This year, *The State of the World's Children 2000* seeks to fan the flame that burned so brilliantly for children a decade ago, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was first adopted in 1989 and when Heads of State and Government convened for the 1990 World Summit for Children. It is a call to leaders in industrialized and developing countries alike to reaffirm their commitment to children. It is a call for vision and leadership within families and communities, where the respect for the rights of children and women is first born and where the protection of those rights begins. And it is a call to all people to realize a new world within a single generation: a shared vision of children and women – indeed of humankind – freed from poverty and discrimination, freed from violence and disease.

## **Promises to keep**

Some of the most dramatic and compelling stories of our times are of the significant gains made in social development when the ideals of human dignity, justice and equality became reality through the actions of governments, organizations and individuals. Millions of people who might have died from communicable diseases and preventable illnesses in the past 50 years were saved because of public health measures such as immunization, improved access to safe water and sanitation facilities, and mass information campaigns.

Hundreds of thousands of women are alive today because of well-spaced and healthy pregnancies. Many more women than before are emancipated from illiteracy, largely because of political commitments to educate girls, followed by global campaigns and local reforms.

Millions of children, born of healthy mothers, well-nourished and immunized against childhood diseases, have survived, whereas others, born before the child survival and development revolution of the 1980s and its life-saving programmes, did not. And thousands of children and adolescents are now in school, shielding them from a life on the streets.

But there are also sombre accounts of the 20th century about actions and inaction and times when not even the slightest shadow of the ideals of human rights could be seen. Clearly, not all have enjoyed the fruits of progress – and children and women especially have been denied.

Over the last 20 years, as the world economy increased exponentially, the number of people living in poverty grew to more than 1.2 billion, or one in every five persons, including more than 600 million children.

How can one era hold such disparate and conflicting realities? Why has progress been possible in some countries and not in others?

Answers to these questions turn on the point of leadership. Where leadership for children and women is just, their rights can be protected. Where leadership is abdicated, abuses and human rights violations follow.

## **An altered landscape**

When the story turns to leadership on behalf of children's rights, there are no more exhilarating chapters than those that tell of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1990 World Summit for Children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child put forward several principles to guide the world's work on behalf of child rights, including one with the most expansive potential: that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning the child. Moreover, another compelling clause made it clear that a partnership of rich nations and poor is vital so that resources are committed to the extent possible at the national level and assistance is pledged internationally to ensure children's opportunity to enjoy their rights.

Following closely on the adoption of the Convention by the UN General Assembly, the World Summit for Children was convened in New York City in September 1990. The 71 Heads of State and Government and others who assembled drafted an ambitious plan for the closing decade of the century, with 27 goals to be accomplished by the year 2000.

## **The price of failure**

For all the gains made, the story of the 20th century is also about failed leadership – a lack of vision, an absence of courage, a passive neglect. The number of violations of children’s rights that occur around the globe every day are, in fact, staggering.

Every day that nations fail to meet their moral and legal obligations to realize the rights of children, 30,500 boys and girls under five die of mainly preventable causes, and even more children and young people succumb to illnesses, neglect, accidents and assaults that did not have to happen.

Every month that the full-scale campaign needed to stop the terrifying HIV/AIDS pandemic is postponed, 250,000 children and young people become infected with the fatal virus.

Every year, 585,000 women die of complications of pregnancy and childbirth that could have been prevented.

In the last year alone, approximately 31 million refugees and displaced persons were caught in conflicts that ravaged the world.

Every year that governments fail to spend what is needed to support basic social services and that development assistance is slashed, millions of children throughout the developing world are deprived of the access to safe water and sanitation facilities, and school and health services that are vitally necessary for them to survive and develop.

These are gross violations of the rights of children and women and as long as they persist – and the circumstances that give rise to them remain unchanged – human development will be compromised.

## **Undeclared war**

Despite the progress made on many of the goals set at the 1990 World Summit for Children, this has been a decade of undeclared war on women, adolescents and children as poverty, conflict, chronic social instability and preventable diseases such as HIV/AIDS threaten their human rights and sabotage their development.

## **The poverty trap**

The number of people living in poverty continues to grow as globalization proceeds along its inherently asymmetrical course: expanding markets across national boundaries and increasing the incomes of a relative few while further strangling the lives of those without the resources to be investors or the capabilities to benefit from the global culture. The majority are women and children, poor before, but even more so now, as the two-tiered world economy widens the gaps between rich and poor countries and between rich and poor people.

## **Poverty’s deep pockets**

There is no way to calculate the exact number of young boys and girls whose lives are endangered by their sale and trafficking, by debt bondage, serfdom, forced or compulsory labour, forced or compulsory recruitment into armed conflict, prostitution, pornography or by the production and trafficking of drugs. But, according to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), some 250 million children

between the ages of 5 and 14 work in developing countries and some 50 million to 60 million children between the ages of 5 and 11 work in hazardous circumstances.

Even in countries that have robust economic growth, poverty is paralysing ever greater numbers, as in parts of Latin America, where the poorest 20 per cent of people share less than 3 per cent of national income.

In still other countries, deepening pockets of poverty are masked in average national statistics. Only by disaggregating the national averages can the poor who are huddled in the margins be located – and in many countries, they are the most difficult to reach.

## **Conflicts and violence: No haven for a child**

In the decade since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, more than 2 million children have been killed and more than 6 million injured or disabled in armed conflicts.

With the breakdown of many official nation-states and an unbridled international trade in weapons, the ‘internal wars’ of the late 20th century are arenas of chronic human insecurity and flagrant atrocities, with increasingly large populations governed and terrorized by rogue groups.

Like the ravages of poverty, the festering conflicts of today, many masked as ‘political instability’, threaten much of the remarkable achievements in health and education that governments, the international community and local citizens have laboured long decades to attain.

At the same time, there is pervasive violence in both the industrialized and developing worlds that runs through the lives of children and women – sometimes a subtle subtext, other times a pattern of explosive moments – in their families and communities, in mass media and entertainment. The incidence of violence within a family, though hidden from public sight and statistics, is almost certainly the most persistent, sparing no society or culture as it trickles down from one generation to the next, turning children reared on violence into violent adults.

## **The sustainability of conflict**

More than half of the world’s poorest countries are embroiled in ongoing or incipient crises. These conflicts, fuelled by a mix of local territorial claims and the proliferation of light weapons, are stirred up by the insatiable hunger of outside parties for land and the natural bounty of gems, oil and, in Asia, opium.

The fact is that poverty, protracted instability, greed and a vacuum of leadership set the stage for many of these wars and the malnutrition, maternal and child deaths, illiteracy and discrimination they spawn.

## **AIDS: A deathly, deadly silence**

Each day 8,500 children and young people around the world are infected with HIV and 2,500 women die from AIDS. In 1998 alone, the number of women killed by HIV/AIDS was 900,000 – more than three times the death toll of the war in Bosnia.

In Africa, the social and economic devastation caused by HIV/AIDS in the last decade is greater than the combined destruction of the continent’s wars: An estimated 200,000 Africans, most of them women and children, died as a result of conflicts in 1998 while 2 million people were killed by AIDS.

Early in its assault the disease cut down the educated: professionals, administrators, teachers. Today, in sub-Saharan Africa, as all over the world, HIV/AIDS preys on the young, poor and powerless – girls and women in particular.

While the educated have access to the knowledge needed to protect themselves from the virus, the life-saving information is not finding its way to those with little or no education. According to a study of 35 countries, the uneducated, whether men or women, were five times more likely to know nothing about the disease than were those with post-primary schooling.

There can be little doubt that the same catastrophic combination of stigma, taboo and silence that continues to fuel the deadly epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa is repeating itself in South Asia. Since HIV/AIDS appeared in South Asia in 1986, more than 5 million people in the region have been infected with the virus, about half of them women.

One of the most outrageous dangers to children in South Asia is their invisibility in the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Whatever information is collected is not disaggregated to show the disease's effects on children. This makes it all the more difficult to identify those whose rights are most at risk and protect them from further harm.

## In a single generation

The principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provide the world with a vision of what the 21st century could bring – children and adolescents living in stable and nurturing homes and communities where, with adult guidance and protection, they have ample opportunities to develop the fulness of their strengths and talents and where their human rights are respected.

Success in achieving this vision will depend as it always has on political commitment and additional resources at all levels. And success will also depend on the visionary leaders who will meet in 2001, ready to move forward with urgency and passion, determined to make life better for children within the next generation.

The obstacles to realizing the rights of children in the 21st century are daunting, it is true. But, considering the significant achievements of the last decades and the vision and language of hope that surround the 2001 meeting of global leadership, optimism springs: The barriers to all children everywhere realizing their rights can and will be broken within a single generation.

## Poverty does *not* always have to be with us

The patterns of poverty that are passed from one generation to the next can and will be broken when the poor have the means and opportunity to be healthy and well-nourished enough, and educated and skilled enough, to fully participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Access to basic health, education, family planning and water and sanitation services is what makes sustained and stable economic progress possible, helps people achieve greater productivity and forms an especially crucial buffer for children and women in difficult times.

In order to create funding for these much-needed services, an idea championed by then UNICEF Executive Director, James P. Grant, the 20/20 Initiative was launched at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, and pursued the following year at the World Summit for Social Development, convened in Copenhagen. The Initiative suggests as a guiding principle

that developing countries commit 20 per cent of their budget and donor countries 20 per cent of their official development assistance (ODA) to build and buttress these services.

ODA, however, has declined alarmingly in recent years, jeopardizing resources and creating strains on development goals. It dropped 21 per cent between 1992 and 1997, and among the leading industrialized countries, it dropped almost 30 per cent during the same period.

But governments in the developing world must answer as well for their budget decisions. Of 27 developing countries recently surveyed, only 5 – Belize, Burkina Faso, Namibia, Niger and Uganda – allocate virtually 20 per cent of their budgets to basic social services. Meanwhile, international creditors have done little to ease the debt burden that drains the national resources of indebted countries. The rights of children throughout the world are not likely to be realized as long as governments remain trapped in debt bondage.

Finally, efforts are needed to regulate the powerful forces of globalization, without which it will continue to serve the expansion needs of global markets at the expense of equity between and within nations. As a result, the poor and vulnerable in the world will reap increasingly fewer benefits, leading to their further marginalization and social exclusion.

In keeping with the intent of article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, any attempts to regulate globalization should address the best interests of children through a ‘child impact analysis’. Such an assessment would review any proposals for their impact on children, taking into consideration, for example, whether changes in economic policies protect the rights of children to education and health services or whether changes in labour policies specifically address the issue of child workers.

### **“All wars are wars against children”**

The UNICEF 1996 Anti-war Agenda stated: *“Children need be the victims of war only if there is no will to prevent it. Experiences in dozens of conflicts confirm that extraordinary actions have been taken and can be taken to protect and provide for children.”*

Since that time, a number of significant measures have helped ensure higher visibility and greater protection of children, even as conflicts and atrocities seem to build. As of 1 November 1999, 89 countries have ratified the Ottawa treaty on the prohibition of anti-personnel landmines. There are ongoing international efforts supporting an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that would raise the minimum age for children’s recruitment into armed forces and participation in conflict from 15 to 18 years. And in 1998, the International Criminal Court, another mechanism for international accountability, was accorded the authority to prosecute as war criminals those conscripting and using children under 18 in hostilities.

For nearly two decades, UNICEF has built a peace and security agenda on its belief that children – whether in their homes, in the streets, in their schools or in camps for the displaced – should be respected by all as a ‘zone of peace’, a concept first advanced to UNICEF by the distinguished Swedish humanitarian, the late Nils Thedin. It is a commitment recently reaffirmed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Ceasefires have been negotiated for ‘days of tranquillity’ and ‘corridors of peace’ to bring food and vaccines to children trapped in wars, including those in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Lebanon, Sudan and Uganda, ground-breaking efforts that saved millions of children from malnutrition and disease.

Because the immediate crises caused by war are dramatic and pressing, they can obscure longer-term needs. Helping children and communities cope with the traumas and tensions that continue after fighting subsides is vital. It is also crucial that world leaders, who have been willing to bear the expense of militarization, not shrink from the costs of peace and demobilization. Experience in countries such as Angola, Liberia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone has taught us that without a long-term commitment to the retraining and reintegration of combatants, post-conflict societies risk careening into anarchy and crime.

### **HIV/AIDS will *not* have its way**

The world has little valid excuse for not embarking on a strategy that is known to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS: relevant information that is readily available, educational and health services that are accessible and cater to adolescents, and the direct involvement of young people in their own health, development and protection. Nor has the world an excuse for failing to undertake the specific actions recognized as crucial: teaching prevention to young people and teaching mothers how to reduce mother-to-child transmission, providing care and support to orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS, and providing care and support to those AIDS workers and volunteers who are themselves HIV positive.

Other vital measures, including testing, counselling, drug treatments and condom distribution, are needed, as is further research for vaccines, more affordable drug therapies and the identification of the best practices for reducing mother-to-child transmission of the virus. Counselling and social services are also needed to protect infants from infection, support their HIV-positive mothers and provide compassionate care to those children left orphaned.

Tragically, there is no indication that the resources needed to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS will be forthcoming. If the international funds for poverty reduction this decade have been a disgrace, the outlays to fight the global HIV/AIDS pandemic are an outrage. In 1996 and 1997, donor nations gave an estimated \$350 million each year to combat HIV/AIDS, in meagre comparison to the \$60 billion that was given by the international community to the Republic of Korea during the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s.

## **Within a single generation: The global agenda**

What children and all people need is well known: a world where rights are secure and people can thrive without injustice, untenable poverty and disease.

Research and practice have revealed that opportunities that are unmatched in their potential for beneficial change present themselves during early childhood, the primary school and adolescent years.

### **Early childhood care**

Science now tells us that optimal neural development in a child, which affects physical, mental and cognitive development, depends on the good nutrition and loving stimulation the child receives during the first months and years of life. Research also clearly illustrates the powerfully positive effects of the bonding and interaction between infants and young children and their parents and caregivers on all aspects of the child's survival, growth and development.

These ideas are catching fire in communities around the world. In many of these settings, parents and local health, nutrition and education workers have embraced a broad perspective on children's well-being. Much of this work takes place without fanfare, but, every day, significant changes in consciousness and practice are occurring somewhere.

Communities are demonstrating that early, low-cost interventions can both help secure children's rights and save millions of dollars in later costs to society.

## **Quality education**

The ability to claim and enjoy the rights of an informed and responsible citizen rests squarely upon a child's access to a good basic education. A quality education – one that encourages children's participation and critical thinking and is infused with the values of peace and human dignity – has the power to transform societies in a single generation. Furthermore, the fulfilment of a child's right to education offers protection from a multitude of hazards, such as a life consigned to poverty, bonded labour in agriculture or industry, domestic labour, commercial sexual exploitation or recruitment into armed conflict.

While the majority of the world's children are attending school, more than 130 million are not. Reasons and excuses for this failure abound: Tuition and other fees overwhelm family incomes; teachers are poorly trained; and curricula are dull and irrelevant to children.

The yearning and reverence for education, however, run deep in societies around the world. Thousands of communities have devised ingenious ways to improve education for all children and to attract and retain girls in school. Children are being educated in multigrade classrooms, in cluster schools and by radio. Another movement gaining momentum is the child-friendly school, which promotes universal enrolment in and graduation from primary school. A school is truly child-friendly when both girls and boys find it a safe, welcoming and healthful environment, centred on the rights of the child, where teachers demonstrate respect for those rights and where students discover that education is not only relevant to their lives but also a source of joy. These initiatives have contributed to the narrowing gender gap in primary education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia – regions where it has historically been the widest.

## **Adolescents**

At once vulnerable and worldly, adolescents are a particularly heterogeneous group: in some societies, married or parents themselves; in others, alienated and isolated from the adult world or in need of special protection from sexual exploitation, child labour or recruitment into armed conflict. In still other societies, they head households because their parents have died from AIDS or as a result of war or violence. In many, they are the primary wage earners.

In all cases, the rights of adolescents to development and participation are ensured by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In every region of the world, countries are moving forward with a diverse range of programmes focusing on topics that illustrate the range of an adolescent's world: the age of marriage and child-bearing, girls' school enrolment, the nutritional status of girls, child labour, HIV/AIDS, armed conflict and family separation, child soldiers, sexual abuse and exploitation and female genital mutilation.

Because an estimated 250 million children living today will be killed by tobacco, UNICEF has joined WHO in efforts to put a stop to the gross violation of children's rights that tobacco use poses.

For adolescents, involvement in programmes specifically designed for them and in more general community activities is a way of developing their talents and bolstering their confidence and sense of self, as well as contributing to the wider world. One intercountry project on adolescents' rights to participation and development is now under way in 13 countries – Bangladesh, China, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Jamaica, Jordan, Malawi, Mali, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and Zambia. Programme planning will focus on a number of key issues, such as Youth-Friendly Health Services, access to education, peer counselling, freedom from exploitation and abuse, and safe spaces for meetings, recreation and sports.

## **Measures of humanity**

The world has more children living in poverty now than it did 10 years ago. It is more unstable and more violent than it was in 1990 when leaders at the World Summit pledged to reach 27 goals for children and women by the year 2000.

What were not easy promises to keep in the last 10 years are even more difficult today, and so the leadership that is called for now is qualitatively different than before. It is a leadership not only of governments but one broad enough to include all those in every country of every region who have embraced the cause of children as their own.

It will need to be far-sighted enough to ensure that all pregnant women are adequately nourished and immediate enough to protect children from being slaughtered in conflict.

It will need to be as specifically focused as the monks who serve as HIV/AIDS community counsellors in the Mekong Delta region of East Asia and as broad as changing the world's mindset about the rights of women and children.

It will need to be on as grand a scale as the 1992 constitutional amendment in India, home to 1 billion people, that set aside a third of all governmental seats for women and a percentage of those for women of the lowest castes. And as personal as sending a young girl to school rather than keeping her at home.

No less will do.