

THE STATE OF
THE WORLD'S
CHILDREN
2002

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Carol Bellamy, Executive Director,
United Nations Children's Fund

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The State of the World’s Children 2002: Leadership

By Carol Bellamy, Executive Director, United Nations Children’s Fund

Governments, as well as international institutions, must be held accountable for their leadership in putting the rights and well-being of children above all other concerns. And those that fail to do so must also be held accountable.

Ensuring the rights and well-being of children is the key to sustained development in a country and to peace and security in the world. Meeting this responsibility, fully, consistently and at any cost, is the essence of leadership. Heads of State and Government hold the lion’s share of this responsibility but commitment and action are also called for across the board: from community activists and entrepreneurs, from artists and scientists, from religious leaders and journalists – and from children and adolescents themselves.

I. *Birth and broken promises:* There was high excitement in the village, the kind of9
joy and optimism that only a new baby can bring. Ayodele was a beautiful baby, full of limitless potential, her whole life before her. For this moment, as should be the case at the birth of any child, everyone set aside their fears and doubts about the future, their anxieties about family health and growing enough food. They congratulated the baby’s parents and contemplated the resurgent hope that new life always brings.

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, there was a birth of a different kind, one to which great hope was also attached. An unprecedented number of country presidents and national leaders gathered in New York for the World Summit for Children. It was September 1990, a time of unusual optimism in the world.

II. *“To change the world with children:”* Since the earliest days of its existence,33
UNICEF has called the world’s attention to the situation of children – to the many of them bruised by the operation of national societies and the global economy, to the ways in which they have suffered because of their parents’ poverty, to how their health has suffered through lack of food or immunization and their mental development through poor health, abuse and neglect and lack of education – and has taken action to offset the damage.

III. *Actions that can change the world:* Unquestionably, countries with the most51
power in the global economy need to show leadership in the pursuit of child rights. But developing countries’ disadvantage does not exempt their governments from the need to demonstrate leadership on behalf of children. The rights of children are indivisible and paramount. No society should be satisfied until the rights of all are guaranteed and respected.

Investing in children is, quite simply, the best investment a government can make. No country has made the leap into meaningful and sustained development without investing significantly in its children.

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Foreword

Like millions of people around the world, I have signed on to the ‘Say Yes for Children’ campaign, which proclaims that “all children should be free to grow in health, peace and dignity.” Can there be a more sacred duty than our obligation to protect the rights of a child as vigilantly as we protect the rights of any other person? Can there be a greater test of leadership than the task of ensuring these freedoms for every child, in every country, without exception?

At the United Nations General Assembly’s Special Session on Children this September, the international community will take up this challenge as it reviews the progress that has been made since the 1990 World Summit for Children. Ten years have yielded mixed results. Three million fewer children under five now die each year, due in large part to immunization programmes and the dedicated efforts of families and communities. In developing countries, 28 million fewer children under five suffer the debilitating effects of malnutrition. More than 175 countries are polio-free, and 104 have eliminated neonatal tetanus. Yet despite these gains, more than 10 million children still die from mostly preventable diseases, some 600 million children still live in poverty, and more than 100 million – the majority of them girls – are not in school.

Of all the lessons learned in the past decade, the critical role of leadership is perhaps the most important one to take with us into the new century. Leadership is an imperative if we are to improve the lives of children, their families and their communities. We must put the best interests of children at the heart of all political and business decision-making, and at the centre of our day-to-day behaviour and activities.

This issue of UNICEF’s *The State of the World’s Children* is thus most timely. It calls for leadership from all continents and all sectors of society. It illustrates the many and varied ways that people have shown their commitment to children’s welfare. And it emphasizes the need to give children the best possible start in life, to ensure that every child completes a basic education, and to involve children – adolescents in particular – in the decisions that affect their lives.

These are no doubt ambitious goals, especially given the persistence of poverty, inequality and conflict, and the ravages of HIV/AIDS and other preventable diseases. No single government or organization can hope to achieve them on its own. But together we can build a world fit for children, if each of us does our part and takes the well-being of children as our own responsibility. The Special Session must galvanize our collective efforts. This report is intended as a contribution to that essential work and merits the widest possible readership.



Kofi A. Annan
Secretary-General of the United Nations