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Official Statement of the NGO Committee on UNICEF

Endorsed by: American Psychological Association, Armenian International Women's Association, Armenian Relief Society, The Associated Country Women of the World, The Association for Childhood Education International, The Center for Adoption Policy, Child Welfare League of Canada, Children's Welfare League of America, Christian Children's Fund, Defence for Children International, International Council of Jewish Women, The International Council of Psychologists, International Federation for Home Economics, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Federation of University Women, International Movement ATD Fourth World, International Union of Psychological Science, SOS Kinderdorf International, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Universal Peace Federation, The World Blind Union, World Federation for Mental Health, World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations, World Organization for Early Childhood Education, Zonta International, The NGO Committee on Children's Rights, The NGO Committee on the Family, The NGO Committee on Mental Health, NGO-UNICEF Regional Network for Children in CEE, CIS & Baltic states.

Emerging Themes from NGOs on the World Fit for Children(+5) Commemoration based on the Report of the Secretary General *Follow-up to the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children.*

December 4, 2007

While some progress has been made since the 2002 UN Special Session on Children, some significant gaps remain in achieving the plan of action outlined in *A World Fit for Children*. The following themes were identified by the NGO Committee on UNICEF and other NGOs as needing significantly greater attention by Member States as they reaffirm their commitments of 2002.

1. The Secretary General's report notes the general lack of attention to issues such as **child protection, early childhood development, and nutrition in governments' national development plans** (p. 4, para. 7). These issues must be addressed.

2. **Early childhood development** takes place in both informal and formal settings, in the home, at school, and within the community, religious settings, alternative care settings and the family. Government programs must be undertaken to increase public knowledge and stress the importance of the role that children's socialization processes, learning and cognition, and emotional development play in early childhood development. Well-equipped and well-trained early childhood personnel are essential for the optimal education of our youngest children. The participation of teachers and parents should be strongly included in educational decision making and policy development. This applies to all levels of education, pre-primary through secondary and beyond. Also, early childhood education should be recognized as education, and not simply child care.

3. As countries' average per capita incomes grow and progress is made towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals, **inequity and discrimination** is still prevalent, and in some parts of the world the gap is becoming greater (p.17, para. 84). Government programs to specifically combat discrimination based on such factors as gender, ethnicity, social status, religion, disability, migrant, or refugee status, are necessary to address pervasive inequities in children's access to health care and education. Such initiatives can have a positive influence on the development of children who are subject to such discrimination.

4. The Secretary General's report states that from 2002 to 2005, the number of countries that had reviewed their legal mechanisms for protecting children from violence increased from 61 to 91 (p.5, para. 16). We applaud this increase, yet assert that the concept of **'children at risk' includes groups such as child soldiers and other children affected by conflict** (as stated in para. 63 on p. 14), as well as children on the move, such as migrants, refugees, child laborers and trafficked children. The report states that 40-50 per cent of the 2.45 million forced laborers who have been trafficked are children, and the majority of girls end up being sexually exploited or abused. Furthermore, **access to medical and psychological services for such children must be a high priority**.

5. In the realm of children's rights, **the gap between legislation and enforcement** described in the Secretary General's report (p.5, para. 16) **must be bridged**. Mechanisms for children's rights monitoring and accountability must be put in place. In addition, to move towards this goal, Member States should ensure that children are participating in the legal mechanisms that affect them. In line with para. 19 of the report (p. 6), we encourage a concerted and systematic commitment on the part of member states to promote **children's agency and meaningful participation in all levels of society**, as appropriate.

6. **Violence against children** remains an important area of concern. In light of the recent UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, we applaud the recent resolution calling for the establishment of a Special Representative of the Secretary General for Violence Against Children. "No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable" (S. Pinheiro, Report to UN General Assembly, October 2006). The Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict is a similar position that has been successful in raising greater awareness, attention, coordination, and accountability on issues related to children and armed conflict. An additional position focusing on violence against children will bring parallel, but much needed attention and advocacy to this important issue. We urge a partnership between the new special representative on violence against children, the ILO, and other UN entities to address the serious situation of more than 1 million children who are trafficked for forced labor.

7. The report commends the institutional partnerships that have been forged to address issues of children's rights (p. 6, para. 20). Despite this progress, NGO participation in this sphere must be strengthened. In particular, efforts should be undertaken by Member States, as well as all UN agencies and departments to significantly increase and systematize the **participation and involvement of NGOs** that work with children and families in the development, implementation and evaluation of programs.

8. The Secretary General's report (para. 88, page 18) describes **the role of institutions** in supporting families' care of children. In this regard, we recommend that there be an increase in budgetary allocation to support families and children, as well as children without parental care. It is crucial that this category include **all forms of family, including community-based and kinship care**. Participatory and holistic family-centered frameworks must be consistently applied in the development of legal and programmatic approaches to children's issues. Furthermore, special consideration and government support should be given to community integration, family reunification and resettlement. Foster care and legal adoption may also be considered as options, when coupled with appropriate, accountable, and transparent government-regulated processes. The unique and specific situation of the child must be considered in any decision taken.

9. The report states that in developing countries, the net primary school enrollment is now up to 85 percent and efforts are being made to extend educational opportunities to girls. When working to increase the number of children enrolled in primary school, **quality of education must be emphasized**. (p.13, para. 54). We also caution that gender parity in enrollment is not meaningful if it is a statistical artifact brought about by a decrease in the number of boys enrolled. Nor is it meaningful without statistics on the numbers of girls who actually stay in school and complete the school year. In addition, we encourage schools to implement child-friendly policies, taking into account the most marginalized children, including children with disabilities.

10. Recognizing that school fees and other indirect costs can prevent the poorest children from accessing their right to education, we applaud the report's attention to the need for **elimination of school fees and extension of meals to students** (p. 12, para. 53). In addition, we call on Member States to recognize the need for adequate remuneration and preparation for teachers at all levels of the education system as a critical component for

successful education. We also strongly support the establishment of programs in parenting skills, coaching, literacy training, and adult education which should be vital components of all educational efforts to benefit children.

11. Recognizing that the internet is and can be a significant tool for learning, we strongly support an increased commitment on the part of the United Nations and its agencies **to establish the necessary infrastructure so that the internet can be available throughout the world**, especially for children in rural areas, peri-urban slums and in many developing countries where access is limited. Being mindful of the fact that the radio is still a major source of global influence, especially in rural areas and developing countries, there should be greater attention given to its use for children as an educational vehicle.

12. The Secretary General's report states that **adolescent health** remains a challenge (p. 10 para. 37, 38). We encourage the further development of programs targeting the specific psychological, health, and reproductive needs of adolescents, in line with the goals of the special session.

13. The Secretary General's report notes that more than 100 countries have established programs for the **prevention of mother to-child transmission of HIV**, but few have scaled up those programs to achieve national coverage (p. 15, para. 73). In light of the striking statistic that out of the estimated 2 million pregnant women living with HIV, only 220,000 received treatment for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission, the NGO Committee is concerned at this lack of prioritization of such a crucial issue. In addition, considering that 2.3 million children are infected with HIV (p.15 para. 74), the **incorporation of pediatric treatment, and psychosocial and behavioral interventions are necessary** as mutually reinforcing elements in a comprehensive plan to combat the pandemic. Member States are urged to address this urgently.

14. The Secretary General's report calls attention to sectoral plans that many governments have established to address the needs of the world's most **vulnerable children** (p. 4, para. 7). This category includes the very poorest children from the global North and South. As UNICEF's 2005 State of the World's Children report notes, compounded deprivation is characteristic of children in poverty and it has extremely detrimental effects on their cognitive, emotional and physical development, as well as their future prospects. We assert that care must be taken to ensure that all policies and programs for children **must first reach the needs of the most vulnerable and excluded children**. In addition, when considering the needs of these children, we must recognize that one-dimensional programs rarely produce significant long-term benefits. The Secretary General's report mentions vulnerable children within the programmatic areas of nutrition, healthcare, education, and HIV (paras. 48, 49, 76). Yet a comprehensive approach to combating poverty must include the development of initiatives which **address all of the deprivations symptomatic of poverty** and strengthen the family's and community's capacity to meet their children's needs. This approach can only be successful through multi-sectoral partnerships that incorporate all relevant institutions and actors and that are grounded in participatory ideology.

15. We strongly urge that wherever possible, **all intervention programs that are designed for children** and have a preventative, rehabilitative or an educational component, whether of a medical or psycho-social nature, **be based on acceptable scientific evidence and be empirically evaluated for their effectiveness and cultural appropriateness**.

The NGO Committee on UNICEF and other NGO partners appeal to Member States to strongly consider the above recommendations as they commemorate five years since their commitments to ensure a world fit for every child.