

# Unofficial Summary of the Secretary-general's Report: *We the Children*

*[This document, together with other information on the Special Session on Children, is available on the official site:*

*<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession> ]*

*The UN Secretary-General's report, 'We the Children: End-decade Review of the Follow-up to the World Summit for Children', (A/S-27/3) of 4 May 2001, was considered by the Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children at its third session, in June 2001. It was published by UNICEF in an adapted and abridged version, with some data updated, for the rescheduled Special Session in May 2002. Following is a summary of the report:*

The years from 1990 through 2000 were a time of unprecedented and pivotal actions on behalf of children, starting in 1990, when the largest-ever group of world leaders gathered at the United Nations in New York for the World Summit for Children. They adopted goals that would, if reached, ensure the survival, protection and development of every child by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Convention on the Rights of the Child had entered into force just weeks before, ratified more quickly and by more countries than any previous human rights instrument.

The leaders at the World Summit promised to protect children; to diminish their suffering; to promote the fullest development of their human potential; and to make them aware of their needs, their rights and their opportunities. They embraced the principles that children had 'first call' on all resources, and that the best interests of children came first in good times and bad, in peace or war, in times of prosperity or economic distress. The resulting Declaration and Plan of Action included 27 specific goals, an ambitious but feasible agenda for children, to be achieved by 2000.

The Summit specified the actions needed, the reform of policies and legislation, and support for the broad mobilization of media, families, communities, children and young people, to make the goals a reality.

Over the decade, some 155 countries prepared National Plans of Action to meet the goals, over 100 countries gathered data on the situation of their children and a record 192 countries ratified, acceded to or signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN Secretary-General provided periodic updates to the UN General Assembly on the progress being made, including a major mid-decade review in 1996. In the year 2000, a massive end-decade review process culminated in the preparation of substantive national progress reports by nearly 150 countries.

The results include tremendous achievements and broken promises, successes and setbacks, significant progress for children in a number of areas, but also slippage.

The journey to further gains for children begins anew with the UN General Assembly Special Session. The Special Session is a milestone in the growing consensus on the need to place children at the heart of genuine and sustainable human development. Children are now on the Security Council agenda, their welfare recognized as central to issues of peace and security, and investment in children will be critical to the achievement of the goals set at the 2000 Millennium Summit to reduce extreme poverty, ignorance and disease. Indeed, the Millennium agenda for peace and development is inextricably linked to children's rights. For it is only through children that entrenched cycles of poverty, exclusion, intolerance and discrimination can be ended.

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DECADE**

### **Successes**

- 65 countries achieved the World Summit goal of reducing child mortality by one third or more, while more than 100 countries cut such deaths by one fifth;
- By the end of 2000, one and a half million fewer children died than in 1990;
- The high levels of child immunization reached in the late 1980s in most regions have been sustained and polio is on the verge of eradication;
- Child deaths from diarrhoeal disease have been halved, saving more than one million young lives each year;
- Massive efforts to iodize salt protect some 91 million newborns each year from the loss of learning ability caused by iodine deficiency;
- More children are in school than ever before;
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child has become the most widely ratified human rights treaty and is changing the way in which we view, and treat, our children;
- Children are, at last, on the agenda.

## **Growing commitment**

**The Global Movement for Children (GMC)** – Building a world fit for children is not a short-term proposition, nor is it the responsibility of any one organization. It requires long-term commitment from the widest range of players. The GMC, an expanding alliance of world leaders, the public and private sector and individuals, including children and young people, aims to build a world fit for children and ensure that promises made at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children are kept.

**Say Yes for Children**, an unprecedented global pledging campaign, has rallied people behind 10 key principles for child well-being, galvanizing action and leadership for children at all levels of society, from political leaders to ordinary children. Since its launch in April 2001, it has garnered almost 95 million pledges worldwide – a tide of support for child rights.

**Youth opinion polls** have gathered the views of nearly 40,000 children 9 to 18 years old in 72 countries in East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Asked for their views on their political leaders, these young people have made it clear that they expect them to deliver on the promises they make at the Special Session.

## **Setbacks**

- Nearly 11 million children died in 2000 from largely preventable causes;
- Almost 150 million children in developing countries are malnourished;
- Around 120 million children are not in primary school – most of them girls;
- Around 600 million children live in absolute poverty, on less than \$1 a day;
- Children are still exploited and abused as labourers, prostitutes and soldiers;
- HIV/AIDS has reversed decades of progress in child mortality in many African countries;
- There is too little investment in basic services for children and overall ODA has fallen.

## **BARRIERS TO PROGRESS**

**Lack of investment:** Investment in basic social services remains widely inadequate, and the resources promised in 1990 have yet to materialize.

**Misplaced priorities and lack of commitment:** Developing countries spent, on average, more on military expenditures than on basic education or basic health care in the 1990s, while

industrialized countries spent about ten times more on defense than on international development assistance.

**Discrimination:** This occurs on the basis of ethnicity, gender, religion, and on the basis of childhood itself – with children coming low on the list of priorities.

## **Trends**

### **Global prosperity – but the poor left behind.**

Despite spectacular economic growth in the 1990s as globalization gathered momentum, poverty remains the single biggest obstacle to child well-being.

The number of people living in absolute poverty rose by an average of 10 million each year in the 1990s. In today's \$30 trillion global economy, around 40 per cent of children in developing countries – around 600 million – live on less than \$1 a day.

Poverty strikes at children's growing minds and bodies and undermines the roots of their potential for development. Poverty is a killer, as shown by the disparities in child mortality between social groups in most countries. On average, a child from the poorest 20 per cent of the population is at least twice as likely to die before the age of five as a child from the richest 20 per cent.

The gulf between rich and poor widened in the decade: In 1990 the annual income per person in rich countries was 56 times higher than in low-income countries; by 1999 it was 63 times higher. Average incomes rose in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, wavered in East Asia as a result of the economic crisis of 1997-1998 and remained largely static in South Asia. In countries that were once part of the Soviet bloc, the transition from central planning saw increased unemployment and social dislocation. In sub-Saharan Africa, already minimal incomes in most countries shrank further.

Globalization, as the statistics show, is not in itself a solution to poverty. It must be matched by efforts to create and strengthen social institutions, services, programmes and policies that protect and liberate the poor, particularly children.

### **Progress on childhood disease – but devastation by HIV/AIDS.**

Great progress against childhood disease has been one of the most remarkable developments of the past decade, with immunization campaigns and efforts to cut child deaths from diarrhoeal disease contributing to a worldwide fall in child mortality. But the spread of HIV/AIDS is a catastrophe that threatens not only the last decade of progress, but also the previous five decades of hard-won advances in the care and nurture of children. In large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, these gains have already been undone and many families in Asia, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and elsewhere are now threatened.

By the end of 2000, HIV/AIDS had claimed nearly 22 million lives and had orphaned an estimated 13 million children – 90 per cent of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Life expectancy has fallen by between 18 and 23 years in the worst-affected countries, infant and child mortality rates have soared and health services have been overwhelmed. The deaths of many teachers have crippled schools already under pressure – and pupils have dropped out of school to care for sick relatives. The disease increasingly affects young people, girls and women, and people who are illiterate and poor. Adolescent girls are now overrepresented among the newly infected in most countries.

A few countries that took energetic steps to confront the pandemic in the 1990s have seen encouraging results. But in far too many places, children and young adults are paying the price for the lack of public awareness efforts, school-based education and prevention initiatives. Decisive action is needed to ease the impact of HIV/AIDS on children in the worst affected countries and prevent further increases in countries where rates of HIV/AIDS are still relatively low.

### **Some gains for women – but persistent discrimination.**

The 1990s saw growing recognition of the links between the rights of women and children. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, became the second most ratified human rights convention and many governments amended legislation accordingly. There are more women in the labour force than in 1990; there are more girls in school, but gender gaps in school enrolment remain a concern in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

But gender discrimination remains rife, and less headway was made here than in most other areas of social development. Working women are, on average, paid less than their male counterparts, have less access to productive resources and receive little support for child care.

Little progress is evident in maternal mortality rates, a failure that reflects the low status of women and the lack of investment in their well-being.

Gender violence continues unabated, including sex-selective abortion and female infanticide; female genital mutilation; so-called ‘honour’ killings; domestic violence and abuse; prostitution and trafficking; and the use of rape as a weapon of war.

### **New awareness of child rights – but exploitation and violence remain.**

The 1990s saw growing recognition of child rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by virtually every nation. Its impact has been immense. Many national constitutions have added specific provisions on children, programmes to meet children’s rights have moved up the policy ladder, and the media are increasingly highlighting children’s issues. However, children are still the victims of ugly and shameful human activities. The scale of child sexual abuse is only now coming to light, partly as a result of the greater weight given to the testimonies of children. Millions are trapped in prostitution; an estimated 30 million children are caught in trafficking networks.

Conflict has been a major obstacle to the achievement of the World Summit goals. More than two million children were killed in conflicts in the 1990s, millions more physically disabled and psychologically scarred, including those who were lured or coerced into armed groups. By the end of 2000, 35 million people were refugees or internally displaced – 80 per cent of them women and children.

Accidents, violence and suicide are the main killers of adolescents, often fuelled by alcohol and drug abuse – prompted by alienation, social exclusion and the breakdown of families.

Some 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are working, up to 60 million of them engaged in intolerable forms of labour.

### **Debt relief accelerates – but aid diminishes.**

The enormous debt burden carried by developing countries is a major obstacle to human development and to investment in child well-being. By the end of the 1990s, the 41 heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) owed about \$205 billion in external debt – about 130 per cent of their combined GNP. Some low-income countries spend up to five times more on servicing their external debt than on basic social services, making it impossible to reach many of the World Summit goals.

The 1990s saw growing awareness of this issue as a result of pressure from indebted countries and worldwide campaigns to change the views of industrialized countries and international financial institutions. The HIPC initiative, launched in 1996, is the first comprehensive approach on debt reduction and, by December 2000, 22 countries had become eligible for debt relief. Their external debt-service payments are expected to be reduced by one third in the next few years.

International aid, however, dwindled in the 1990s, standing at around 0.22 per cent of total industrialized country GNP by the year 2000 – less than one third of the 0.7 per cent target agreed by the UN General Assembly some 30 years ago. Only four countries reached the target throughout the 1990s: Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. The share of aid allocated to education and health programmes barely improved over the decade, a baffling failure, given the international consensus on the need to invest in children. As it stands, bilateral aid flows from the industrialized countries are \$100 billion a year less than governments have agreed they should be.

There was little targeting of aid to the countries in greatest need. Indeed, one of the most worrying trends of the 1990s was a sharp fall in the amount of aid directed to the poorest countries with the highest child mortality and the weakest basic services.

### **Democratic governance spreads – but care for the environment wanes.**

Good governance is good for children and the 1990s saw progress towards political democratization and reform in many countries. The number of formal electoral democracies increased from 76 to 120 by 2000 and about two thirds of the world's people now live in such

democracies. Many countries decentralized, shifting responsibility for the provision of services to local authorities. In many cases, this has resulted in greater community participation, more transparent decision-making and clearer accountability at local level, enabling local authorities to serve people more effectively. Such decentralization must be backed by adequate financial and human resources.

The progress made for children in the 1990s reflects the key role of NGOs and other civil society actors throughout the decade. These advocates for children have tracked progress towards the World Summit goals, monitored rights violations and encouraged new community-based networks for children. International NGOs have complemented these efforts by generating dialogue and action on economic policy and poverty reduction. The 1990s demonstrated the increasing willingness of governments, international organizations, civil society and the business community to work together for the common cause of children.

It also demonstrated the urgent need to apply such shared commitment to the global environment. Despite the commitments made at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, environmental degradation continued throughout the decade with few governments showing real commitment to address its root causes or manage its effects. The health and lives of many millions of children are under threat as a result of pollution, overcrowding, increased traffic, poor housing and inadequate provision of safe water and basic sanitation. The threat of global warming is a key test of the world's commitment to preserve the planet for its children.

## **BUILDING A WORLD FIT FOR CHILDREN**

### **Lessons learned from the past decade**

As documented in the end-decade review of the Secretary-General on follow-up to the World Summit for Children, the 1990s was a decade of great promises and modest achievements for the world's children.

Yet much more needs to be done. The resources that were promised at the Summit at both the national and international levels have yet to fully materialize. Critical challenges remain; more than 10 million children die each year although most of those deaths could be prevented.

### **Bridging the gap between consensus and action**

The lesson emerging from the frequent gap between commitments made and action taken is that the challenges confronting children must be addressed by enlisting a broad range of actors, on the basis of leadership and accountability throughout society. The most striking advances towards the goals of the World Summit for Children – first in immunization, then in polio eradication, salt iodization, vitamin A supplementation, guinea worm eradication and, in some regions, school enrolment – are found in this combination of strong partnerships and sustained political commitment.

### **Improving the context for child goals and children's rights**

It has also become clear that children's rights and specific child-related development goals are best pursued within the broader framework of human rights. Grossly unequal gender relations, low female representation in politics, high risks of death and injury in pregnancy and lack of education opportunities not only constitute a denial of girl's and women's rights—they also directly undermine the growth and development prospects of children.

Transparent and accountable government, in particular, is an essential condition for securing the rights and development of children. Governments must also play their role as guarantors of comprehensive access to a basic set of public services, including protection from violence and aggression. Where national legislation to end impunity is combined with local mobilization and awareness of illegality, it is possible to curb violence and abuse against children.

Intergovernmental and regional partnerships are also demonstrating their potential impact. Initiatives in the 1990s to address exploitation and violence have shown again how children's rights and progress are directly related, with strong linkages demonstrated between education systems and the reduction of child labour; birth registration and the access of minority children to basic services; and humanitarian relief and child protection in conflict situations.

### **Seeing children differently and taking action accordingly**

From the failure of earlier projects, which "targeted" children as "problem individuals", we have seen that the roots of problems affecting children are usually found in the wider social setting. Policies need to focus on addressing not only immediate factors affecting children but also the broader reasons for their exclusion.

The prevailing view of adolescents should also continue the shift from seeing them as harbingers of problems, such as violence and drug abuse, to viewing them as potential contributors to solutions in their own lives and in wider society.

A compelling case for investing in children's progress – and for special efforts for the most disadvantaged.

Well-integrated programmes for children in early childhood and in support of families, especially those in high-risk situations, are now widely understood to be powerful investments and to have lasting benefits both for children and overall economic development. The 1990s have dramatically increased the evidence that the education and healthy growth of children are crucial for future economic progress and to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Investing in children from the earliest years rests at the core of the long-term development of societies.

Action should be guided not only by how many children are attending school but also by why some children, often girls or those from minority language groups, are still not attending or succeeding. Why do many adolescents manage to avoid HIV infection, while others, predominantly girls, become infected? Such questions need to be asked if children and families are not to be left behind.

## **Children and families as participants in development**

More generally, sustained development and poverty reduction are now seen, almost universally, to require the strong participation of children, women and men in the decisions that affect them—within the family and community and at the local and national levels.

As seen in many community-led schemes, women who are fully involved in decision-making become effective agents for social change.

Interventions in the 1990s have begun to take advantage of the “new resource opportunities” that are rapidly becoming available, through partnerships and the falling cost of new technology in information, communication and medical science.

It is increasingly evident, however, that problems that were often seemingly intractable during the 1990s – such as maternal mortality, protein-energy malnutrition, poor hygiene and sanitation, HIV/AIDS and endemic violence—cannot be resolved through single-sector or “vertical” approaches alone. Where access to sanitation has improved, for example, it has involved more than better technology: where people have seen the relationship between safe water, sanitation and health, they have made this a priority in their communities.

The role of parents and the wider family in the care and nurturing of children should never be underestimated.

## **Merits of a goal-focused approach**

Time-bound, well-specified goals and intermediate targets have shown great power to motivate and to provide a platform for partnerships and a basis for regular monitoring and reporting on progress. The challenge is to pursue clear and widely agreed goals in ways that help advance the rights of children.

## **Public action, partnerships and participation**

Broad public-private-community coalitions and attention to the poorest and most vulnerable have been found to be central in the 1990s together with clear and effective policies, combined with child-friendly legislation and systems for accountability, to reducing the gap between promises and action—and to making rapid progress for children.

## **Moving forward**

A world fit for children is a just and peaceful world. It is one in which all children are given the love, care and nurturing necessary for the best possible start in life, where they complete a basic education of good quality and, in adolescence, are supported to develop their potential.

Families and caregivers are the vanguard of such a world, and that is why the poverty in which many millions of parents struggle to raise and protect their children must end. Policies,

legislation and budgets must address poverty, counter discrimination and reduce inequalities. Private sector contributions, based on principles of social responsibility, should continue to be expanded in support of public action for children.

The standards by which to gauge progress towards a world fit for children are the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Millennium Summit Goals and the International Development Targets. These must all be fully realized if the needs and rights of all children are to be met. Within these frameworks, four areas need particular attention in this new decade:

- Promoting healthy lives;
- Providing good quality education;
- Protecting children from abuse, exploitation and violence;
- Combating HIV/AIDS and all the risks this pandemic poses to children.

Resources must be mobilized for these areas – shifted from such wasteful pursuits as armed conflict and overconsumption. Also, within these areas, special efforts are needed to reach impoverished children and to end violence against children and the discrimination endured by so many girls and women.

Even in the poorest societies, dramatic progress is possible within one generation if we summon the political will to redirect resources towards addressing the basic needs of children.

A society whose children are malnourished, abused, undereducated or exploited cannot truly claim to be progressing, however impressive its economic growth or per-capita income levels might be. Children whose rights are protected, on the other hand, hold the answer for ending entrenched cycles of poverty, exclusion, intolerance and discrimination.

We possess the understanding, experience, normative framework, communications capacity and technical know-how to build a world fit for children. And in this \$30 trillion global economy no one can say that we lack the resources.

It is not a question of what is possible, but of what is given priority. Those who have the responsibility and resources to act may find other issues vying for their attention – but there can be no issue more vital to humanity and its future than the survival and full development of our children.

### **Ten guiding principles**

The 10 main principles that follow are outlined in the draft Declaration of the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children and will guide the discussions at the Special Session. The Declaration calls on every member of society to join a global movement that will:

- Put children first
- Eradicate poverty: invest in children
- Leave no child behind
- Care for every child

- Educate every child
- Protect children from harm and exploitation
- Protect children from war
- Combat HIV/AIDS
- Listen to children and ensure their participation
- Protect the earth for children