

Remarks of Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director, UNICEF
UNICEF Executive Board Annual Session
6 June 2005 • New York, NY

Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, good morning, and thank you for being here today.

It is a pleasure for me to address this Annual Session of the Executive Board, and it is an honor to be leading this great organization, which is at the forefront of positive change on behalf of children and families.

My thanks to all the members of the Executive Board for your support in my appointment as the fifth Executive Director of UNICEF. Thank you not only for taking the time to serve, but also, in many cases, for witnessing for yourselves the relevant work that UNICEF is doing on the ground.

Mr. President, it has been a special pleasure to have had the opportunity to meet with you on other occasions, and to meet several other members of the Executive Board. And, just five weeks into my tenure at UNICEF, it is an excellent opportunity for us to have the exchange of views afforded by your Annual Session.

I commend Carol Bellamy for doing an excellent job in leading UNICEF for the past 10 years, and for her assistance during the transition. Her commitment and dedication have helped this organization continue its tradition as one of the shining stars of the UN system.

Each of my predecessors took UNICEF in important new directions, and it is my intention to build upon their contributions.

One of the things that has impressed me most in the short time I have been at UNICEF is the employees. They are talented, and tireless on behalf of the cause of helping the world's children.

Because some of you do not know me, let me give you a brief idea of who I am and what I bring to my new position. My full biography has been distributed.

I was born and raised in the Central Valley of California. I am a lawyer by training, and was in private practice before joining the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1986.

I served in various positions there including two years as USDA's Deputy Secretary before returning to run California's Department of Food and Agriculture, and in 2001 as the 27th U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

At USDA, I led a Department with one of the largest budgets and portfolios in all of government, with responsibilities including protecting public health, responding to emergencies, supporting good nutrition for women and children through school lunch and breakfast programs, the women, infants and children program, the food stamp program, international food assistance and rural development.

Many of those same issues underlie what UNICEF deals with on an ongoing basis.

We are facing new challenges daily, from the tsunami region to Africa, from Central Asia to the Middle East and Latin America, and we will need the continued support of all of you to address them. Our ongoing dialogue will be critical, not only during the Board sessions, but also throughout the year.

As I continually remind people, there are just 10 years left in which to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. They reflect the collective will of the international community. They are ambitious, but they can be attained.

Indeed, the Millennium Development Goals are synonymous with the needs women and children, and the work of UNICEF can make enormous, positive contributions to all of the Goals.

Progress toward the Millennium Development Goals will benefit, and be sustained, if development is inclusive, based on participation, and respectful of human rights.

For UNICEF's activities, this means:

- A focus on the most marginalized and excluded children, and on the poorest families,
- Participation by people in their own development, including women and children,
- Results that are shared equitably between genders,
- And government institutions and service providers that are accountable to the people they serve.

Collaboration with a wide range of actors, from governments to non-profits, from other UN agencies to international financial institutions and the private sector, will be critical to the Millennium Development Goals and the Millennium Declaration.

UNICEF is deeply committed to strengthening our partnerships at every level. In my first several weeks at UNICEF, I have met with heads of state and government officials at all levels, as well as local staff involved in UN-supported projects.

As many of you are aware, I returned last week from my first field visit as Executive Director to southern Africa. I was pleased to join Jim Morris, Executive Director of the World Food Program, who is also the Secretary General's Humanitarian Envoy for Southern Africa, and Peter Piot of UNAIDS.

The region that we visited was an important one for my first field mission, but just as important, was the united front shown by the UN family.

The trip underlines how our respective organizations can complement each other in supporting governments and other partners, to address the major challenges faced by southern Africa. It also underscores UNICEF's firm commitment to accelerating the UN reform process.

A more coherent UN presence at country and regional level is absolutely essential in order to better carry out our missions, and we continue working with our UN Development

Group (UNDG) partners toward this end. For our efforts to succeed, we must have an effective, even-handed Resident Coordinator system.

UNICEF is working to simplify and rationalize its own business processes with a view toward a common set of operating policies and procedures among field-based organizations, especially our UNDG partners.

It is vital that UNICEF view others, whether UN agencies or other development organizations, not as competitors, but as collaborators. We must consider how our programs and partners work together in a broader context, rather than individual “stovepipes” or areas of interest.

We must seek to find innovative and integrated approaches to major issues of child survival, maternal health, child protection and girls’ education. One example is the integrated package of health interventions we discussed at the World Health Assembly, which have resulted in an estimated 20 percent reduction in child mortality.

The pilot projects were supported by the Government of Canada and were conducted in 11 western African countries.

Even more lives could be saved with a package that includes basic HIV/AIDS interventions, as well.

In Swaziland, we saw a program that integrates nutrition and education. Food grown on school grounds was then served to students in a feeding program, boosting enrollment and academic performance.

We must look for ways to build capacity in the areas we serve, rather than parallel or duplicative support structures. And, we must do all of this, by recommitting ourselves to the Millennium Development Goals as the underpinning of our efforts.

Today, one in six children is still severely hungry, one in seven receives no health care at all, one in five has no safe water, and one in three has no toilet or sanitation facilities at home. And, some 115 million primary school-age children are not in school.

We are here today as leaders for children, for the poor and the vulnerable.

We see in the face of children the expectation that we will work every day for progress on their behalf, and the hope of a better world to come.

We do it not merely for the achievement of numerical goals in 2015, but for the betterment of future generations.

The challenges before us are clear.

In September, heads of state will gather at the UN to conduct an important stock-taking exercise at the Millennium Summit, to see where achievements have been made, and where

progress is lacking. The health, well-being and protection of children must be central to those discussions.

This year's Annual Session of the Executive Board is particularly important, given the very rich and substantive programmatic items on the agenda.

First, you will be reviewing 20 country program documents that support priorities for children and women.

You will also review a second draft of the Strategic Plan for 2006 to 2009, which was developed following intensive consultations with the Board, UN agencies, NGOs, and with UNICEF regional and country offices. I have heard from several Board members that these consultations have been very worthwhile. Your guidance has been particularly helpful, and we look forward to your comments and input during this session.

A final draft will be submitted to you for review and approval at the September session of the board. More than ever before, the Strategic Plan is integrated with, and targeted to helping achieve, the Millennium Development Goals.

You will also hear a series of reports dealing with key focus areas of the Plan.

The session on child protection is the first one to cover all aspects and dimensions of child protection, rather than one specific issue.

The report on HIV/AIDS will show how UNICEF's response to this issue is not "business as usual." There will be a special emphasis on partnerships for scaling up responses, as well as prevention efforts.

The report on post-conflict transition will focus on the evolving strategy, and country-based support, in responding after a crisis or natural disaster.

And finally, the Board will discuss the joint health and nutrition strategy, which is intended to be results-oriented, predictable and accountable.

I am looking forward to many interesting discussions over the next few days. My thanks for your guidance and support. Your input and dedication come at a pivotal time for the well-being of the world's children.

With just 10 years left to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the Executive Board is more critical than ever to the success of UNICEF. Thank you very much, and best wishes for the discussions ahead.

###