a confinement period or the constant carrying of the baby and breastfeeding on demand further the development of the baby’s feelings of security, trust in other people, and sense of self-worth. And indeed, increasing numbers of parents in the Western world are taking their babies out of strollers and carrying them in slings. Those customs that stimulate a baby’s senses and enhance his or her development and even the mystical rituals that have traditionally been used for child protection - different from modern practices as they might seem - merit closer scrutiny as to how well they meet a young child’s needs.

Sources:

for the next generation of children. Investing in children from their very earliest moments displaces negative patterns in a society and allows cycles of hope and change to have their turn.

If a country hopes to loosen the strangleholds to development that are currently wrapped tightly around the lives of families, then it must do four, equally essential things, at the same time.

1. It must continue to make child survival a priority.
2. It must assure that surviving children are healthy and possess the skills to thrive and to live full and productive lives.
3. It must prepare parents for their pivotal role in childcare and build the capacities of communities to support them.
4. It must create a society that is free from violence and discrimination at all levels and that values the lives and contributions of children and women.

Special Session on Children

When the United Nations General Assembly’s Special Session on Children takes place in September 2001, leaders of governments and NGOs will face the continuing challenge of applying the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and meeting the goals set forth at the 1990 World Summit for Children. They will also have the opportunity to be architects of a new agenda for children. They must not fail to recognize that what is best for the youngest citizens is ultimately best for countries.
A necessary
Attention to the youngest children is most needed where it is most difficult to guarantee— in countries gripped by intractable poverty, violence and devastating epidemics, where parents’ hopes and dreams for their children are seriously countered by the realities of life. With the global economy booming, the majority of children still live in poverty. While the world embraces the hope of peace, profit-driven conflicts and ethnic battles erupt, risking the lives and psyches of children. And as HIV/AIDS destroys families, children are left to fend for themselves.

Parents and caregivers struggle for their children’s future every day, seemingly every minute. As they deal with the crises and stresses of their lives, too often they have little energy left for their infants and toddlers. The rights of young children to survive, grow and develop are threatened when the adults in their lives are exhausted.

But these obstacles, while looming large, are not impossible to overcome, as people find and create ways of caring for their children.
In Tanzania, Febronia, a 35-year-old woman, has given birth to seven children. Four have survived: Martha, 10, Angela, 8, Colman, 6, and Grace, 9 months. Two sons died at age 7, one from yellow fever and the other from an unknown cause. Another child, born prematurely, died shortly after birth. Her husband, Damas, 42, sporadically works at a coffee plantation and the family survives on a cash income of about 80,000 shillings a year ($125).

Febronia and her family live in a shanty made of wood, mud and tin. The area around the house is thick with red mud that crusts on the shoeless feet of the mother, father and their four children. Spending an hour each day fetching water from a stream about 3 kilometres away from her home, Febronia worries about leaving her young children alone at home. But what worries her most is being away from the baby for stretches of three hours or longer. While Febronia collects grass for the family’s small herd of cows, Grace is left with Febronia’s eight-year-old daughter after she returns from her half-day of school.

Like many mothers in many countries, Febronia spends each day from dawn to dusk struggling to feed and protect her children, with few resources and little support. She begins her day at 6 a.m. preparing porridge for her family. Besides collecting grass for the cows and water and food for the family, Febronia searches for firewood for cooking. Each day, she takes her small children to bathe in the stream. During the rainy season she tries in vain to keep them clean. Like many in the community, the family does not have a permanent latrine, so the muddy water that swirls past their hut is mixed with faeces.

From morning to night, Febronia’s every waking moment is spent in the service of others. Her tasks are endless. Hours on end, Febronia, a sturdy woman with close-cropped hair, can be seen walking, posture-perfect, carrying heavy loads on her head. Once back home, she cooks, cleans and cares for her family. She works in their small vegetable garden. In between chores, she breastfeeds her baby. After the day’s work is done and the last child is bedded down for the night, she says her prayers and goes to sleep.

Like millions of women worldwide, Febronia is unsafe in her home. She is afraid of her husband, who she says drinks too much alcohol. Sometimes he punches and kicks her.

The seeds of male privilege and female servitude have already been planted in Febronia’s family. While her mother works in the fields, Angela, the shy eight-year-old who still sucks her thumb, takes care of the baby. When 10-year-old Martha with the furrowed brow and pensive eyes returns from school,
she washes dishes, helps cut grass for the
cows and works in the garden. And what
does Febronia's son do while the girls are
working? Colman, a boy with a cherubic face
and an impish smile, plays
in the mud and climbs trees.

Like 1.1 billion people
worldwide, Febronia lacks
access to clean water. After
her daily trek for water, she
must boil it to protect her
children from cholera and
other water-borne diseases.
The family, like 2.3 billion
adults worldwide, does not
have access to a decent latrine.
Without clean water and a
permanent latrine, maintaining good hygiene
is yet another hardship for Febronia and her
family. They risk diarhoeal and other diseases,
including trachoma, an eye infection that is
easily spread among children and their
mothers and which, with repeated occur-
rences, eventually leads to blindness.

Although the family has a small vegetable
garden and a couple of cows, poverty robs the
family of adequate nutrition. The three oldest
children show signs of being malnourished,
with patches of bald spots on their heads.
The eldest child, Martha, has sunken eyes
with deeply dark, puffy circles underneath.
The children are not the only ones: in this
village of 2,448 people there are 10 licensed
bars but no child-feeding centres since 1995.
Here, children without day care are often
without food for stretches, in some cases
for as long as eight hours.

While all but the infant have completed
their immunizations against the six major
childhood killer diseases, Febronia and
Damas have watched three of their children
die. A health worker visits their home each
week, and there is a missionary hospital less
than a kilometre from the village. But Damas
bemoans, “The hospital is there, but without
money, you will die on its doorstep.”

Ten-year-old Martha is in the second grade
of primary school, and the eight-year-old and
six-year-old are involved in pre-school for
two hours each morning. The parents recog-
nize the benefits of pre-
school, boasting that the
children can count, sing and
tell stories. But Damas, a
gaunt man in oversized
dresses, fears that he will
not be able to afford to
keep his children in school.
When he was a child, educa-
tion in Tanzania was free, he
says, and it provided him
with lunch. Today, there
are fees for books and
uniforms, and lunch must be brought from
home. Damas believes that education will
provide a better future for his children, but
without money their chances are lost.

### Challenges to ECD

Why has the decision to invest in ECD, so
seemingly the best public policy for responsible
leaders, not been made in every community
and every country?

Because poverty is a merciless foe. In a time
of unprecedented global prosperity, the World
Bank estimates that in 1998, 1.2 billion people,
including more than half a billion children,
lived in poverty on less than $1 a day.

In the poorest nations, money that could go
to education, health care and infrastructure
improvement is spent on debt repayment.
Developing nations owe more than $2 tril-
lion to the World Bank, the International
Monetary Fund (IMF), other lenders and
industrialized countries. Loans that were
meant to lift countries out of poverty – that
could lift them in a generation if their
monies were invested in ECD today – are
instead dragging them further into debt.

Because of the ever-present threat or reality of
violence. The rights to survival, growth and
development of millions of children throughout the world are at risk along a continuum of violence that stretches from households, where children are often exposed to or are victims of violence and abuse on a routine basis, to international policies, where infants and children die as a result of economic sanctions, to the horrors of modern warfare, where millions are killed and millions more survive only to be haunted by their memories.

And because by killing more than 2 million adults each year, HIV/AIDS strips a front line of protection from the thousands of children who are orphaned each day. HIV/AIDS is a global emergency of devastating impact, taking the lives of adults and children in every region of the world and leaving child survivors to cope without parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles and siblings, teachers and health care workers.

The disease spares no continent. In 1998 alone, 2.2 million Africans died from HIV/AIDS. In 1999, nearly a quarter of a million people in Ukraine had the virus. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 1.7 million people are HIV infected, 37,600 of them children. And in Asia, 6.1 million people, including 205,200 children, were living with HIV at the end of 1999.

The effects of poverty on early childhood

When poverty engulfs a family, the youngest are the most affected and most vulnerable - their rights to survival, growth and development at risk. A child born today in the developing world has a 4 out of 10 chance of living in extreme poverty. This poverty defines every aspect of the child’s existence, from malnutrition, lack of clean water, inadequate sanitation, to life expectancy. It is the main underlying cause of millions of preventable deaths and the reason why children are malnourished, miss out on school or are abused and exploited. And it is at the core of a pervasive violation of children’s rights.

Poor and uneducated parents lack the information needed to provide optimum care for their children, increasing the risks of childhood illness and childhood mortality. Infants born to mothers with no formal education are twice as likely to die before their first birthday than are babies born to mothers with post-primary school education.

For children under two years, malnutrition, as both a consequence and a cause of poverty, has a particularly profound effect. It causes permanent and irreversible damage on the body and mind of the young boy or girl. Infants who are poor and malnourished are more likely to contract respiratory infections, diarrhoea, measles and other
preventable diseases and less likely to receive needed health care. In at least one district of Tanzania today, 80 per cent of the children who die before the age of five die at home without ever going to a hospital.\(^{23}\)

But poverty does not exist solely in the developing world. Pockets of impoverishment exist throughout the industrialized world as well. About 3 million people in 15 countries of the European Union lack permanent housing.\(^{24}\) In the United States, about 17 per cent of all children are growing up in households struggling to meet basic nutritional needs.\(^{25}\) Throughout the industrialized world, mothers and fathers seek services for their children.

Equal to the profound impact of poverty on a young child's right to survival and physical well-being are poverty's effects on the child's rights to psychological, emotional and spiritual development. In both developing and industrialized countries, poverty and family dysfunction go hand in hand, with the youngest children suffering the loss of the close nurturance, stimulation and care that are necessary for healthy development.\(^{26}\)

Poverty's cycle does not stop in one lifetime. A girl born to poverty is more likely to marry early and have a child while still an adolescent. A malnourished girl becomes a malnourished mother, who will give birth to an underweight baby. And, like their parents, poor children are likely to transmit their poverty to the next generation.

Lacking a single indicator, poverty is not always easy to quantify. Simply recognizing income poverty does not acknowledge poverty's non-measurable aspects, such as discrimination, social exclusion or deprivation of dignity. For example, discrimination compounds the effects of poverty on the Roma population throughout Europe. Life expectancy of the Roma is the lowest of any group in Europe. The 1991 infant mortality rate for Roma in the former Czechoslovakia was more than double the rate for the rest of the population.\(^{27}\)
The rights of children are violated every day, as poverty causes millions of the world’s young citizens to go without teachers, medicines, latrines and, in some cases, food and clean water. As it causes millions more to be sold into bondage to pay off family debts or abandoned to institutions because a family is without resources. And causes others to be left on doorsteps in urban slums or starved and neglected, hidden from view in city apartments.

The effects of violence against women on early childhood

Violence is a public health issue in almost every industrialized and developing country in the world, exacting a price in lives, injuries and disabilities, leaving physical and psychological wounds, some of which never heal. The poor are the most likely victims and perpetrators of violence. Women and children, more often than others, are the targets of a wave of rage and aggression that is on the rise across continents due to a complex set of economic, political, social and cultural reasons.28

As violence strikes at the rights of women in every phase of their lives, infants and young children are twice exposed. First is through direct attacks: In some regions of the world, especially in South Asia, violence shows itself in systematic female foeticide and female infanticide.29 In other regions, violence against children is less obvious in its manifestation but not in its effects: Less nutritious food, health care and schooling mean a quiet death for unknown numbers of young children, with young girls and children with disabilities especially at risk.

The second exposure for infants and young children is through their mothers. Women’s powerlessness, caused by both inequality and abuse, threatens babies and young children. Each year, almost 8 million stillbirths and early neonatal deaths occur.
due to women’s poor health and nutrition during pregnancy, inadequate care during delivery and lack of care for the newborn. A Nicaraguan study found that children of women who were sexually or physically abused by their partners were 6 times more likely than other children to die before the age of five. The children of abused women were more likely to be malnourished and less likely to be immunized or to receive oral rehydration therapy for diarrhoea.

Domestic violence. Violence that occurs in the home is a health, legal, economic, educational, developmental and, above all, a human rights issue. It cuts across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age. Relatively hidden and ignored, it is the most prevalent form of violence against women and girls. In the United States alone, estimates are that anywhere from 2 million to 4 million women are violently attacked by their husbands each year.

Violence in the home undermines child survival, and children who witness abuse or are themselves abused exhibit poor health and behaviour problems. Their rights are violated by acts of aggression from those they should be able to count on to protect them. Children who are sexually abused are left traumatized, unable to build the relationships of trust and intimacy that are essential for their healthy development.

It is a tragic irony that women and children are often in the greatest danger in the place where they should feel the most secure – in the home. Violence against women often equates to violence against children, and it perpetuates the cycle as it passes on destructive behaviours and negative role models to the growing and ever-watchful child.

Like other children living in violent households, for example, Martha, Angela, Colman and Grace run the risk of becoming victims of domestic violence. The six-year-old boy may have already learned the role of batterer from his father. The cycle of violence...
can only be broken through early intervention. Clearly, changing the power dynamics between men and women bodes well for children. Tanzania’s push to include men in its early childhood care programmes makes sense. By addressing family and community attitudes towards women, the country may rescue nine-month-old Grace from a lifetime of beatings and discrimination.

The effects of armed conflict on early childhood

On any given day, more than 20 armed conflicts are being fought around the world, most in poor countries. War is traumatic, at the very least disrupting daily lives and usual routines. More likely, violating a child’s rights. In the past decade alone, 2 million children were slaughtered, 6 million were seriously injured or permanently disabled and 12 million were left homeless. It is estimated that between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of people who die or are injured in conflicts are civilians, mostly children and their mothers. In the last decade of the 20th century, over a million children were orphaned or separated from their families because of armed conflict.

In some of the more recent hostilities, children in Sierra Leone, Sudan and northern Uganda witnessed the torture and murder of family members, and those in Chechnya withstood repeated bombings and explosions. During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, a quarter of a million children were massacred. In 1999, Kosovar children, forced from their homes because of ‘ethnic cleansing’, were left homeless, separated from their families and uprooted from everything familiar.

While parents in stable and affluent societies might debate whether to play Mozart or Brahms to best stimulate the brain development of their young infants, those in conflict zones hold their infants close, shaking from the sounds of bombs or rifle fire. While controlled studies can prove the positive effects of gentle cooing and ‘motherese’ on early childhood, one can only surmise what happens to a young child during the uncontrolled reality of war.

Children who endure the inhumanity of war may suffer the scars of post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychological wound that interrupts the development process. For children under three years of age, severe trauma not only emotionally scars them, but it can also permanently change their brain chemistry. So, war’s youngest victims are in special need of physical and psychological care. Healing young children’s physical wounds allows them to survive war. Healing their spirits may prevent the next war.

Zones of peace and child-friendly spaces. Children in war zones are expected to bear the unbearable and to understand the inexplicable. During these times of extreme crisis, one wonders how infants, toddlers, children and their families can be offered anything more than basic tools of survival: food, water and limited shelter. The global community may see cognitive development and psychological care as luxuries when physical needs are clearly the priority. But even in crisis, children cry out not only for food and water but also for comfort and love. Without interventions, the traumatized child may become frozen in time. The infant withdraws and becomes listless. The toddler, overwhelmed with fear, regresses to bed-wetting and thumb sucking. The pre-schooler, submerged in grief, acts out aggressively or retreats into silence.

To save both the lives and minds of children, UNICEF and its partners attempt to

Money that could be spent on building young lives is instead wasted on destruction.
create ‘zones of peace’ and ‘child-friendly spaces’ in many crisis situations. In Sri Lanka, Sudan and other countries, UNICEF and other organizations negotiated with combatants to permit a cessation of hostilities so that children could be reached with food, medicine and vaccinations. In spite of armed conflict, combatants allowed children’s immunizations to go on as planned. Sadly, these ‘corridors of peace’ are not always implemented. This past year, Sierra Leone cancelled two of its four planned National Immunization Days due to renewed hostilities.

Providing food and shelter to children creates some sense of normalcy in an abnormal situation. Providing schooling, play and counselling does so more completely. During the massive flow of refugees to Albania during the ethnic conflict in Kosovo, relief agencies first provided drugs, vaccines, clean water and food to prevent infant, child and maternal mortality. After these initial survival strategies were in place, the Child-Friendly Spaces Initiative (CFS) provided infant care, pre- and primary school education, recreational activities, psychosocial support for infants and toddlers and counselling for children and their families.

It is difficult to juxtapose the images of children colouring, stacking blocks and dancing with the images of children screaming in fear, huddling next to a wounded parent or lying on sheets saturated with their own blood. But in caring for children scarred by war, caregivers must attend to these young victims’ emotional damage as well as to their physical wounds.

Stealing from infants and children. War is costly. It impoverishes a nation, stealing not only from its treasury but also from its people’s spirit and from its most vulnerable citizens – children. In addition to the physical and emotional scars that organized violence causes, it drains precious resources. Money that could be spent on building young lives is instead wasted on destruction. During a recent border war, for example, Eritrea and Ethiopia spent hundreds of millions of dollars on weapons, while 1 million Eritreans and 8 million Ethiopians faced famine.
Costing more than 60,000 lives to date, the internal conflict in Sri Lanka has depressed the economy. Sri Lanka’s central bank reports that the armed conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhalese-majority Government has been the difference between a projected mid-level economy and the lower economy the country actually has. The Government of Sri Lanka has raised its defence budget to $880 million from $700 million. Every dollar spent on a warplane is one unavailable to be spent on children. In the village of Ambanganga, there are no bombs or landmines. Yet children like Priyanthi’s daughter and son are nonetheless deeply affected by the conflict as money is spent on warplanes, robbing them of clean water, adequate sanitation, vaccines, books and passable roads.

In the combat area of Sri Lanka’s Jaffna Peninsula, the cost of the war is far higher. Here children and their families are living under fire and older children have been taken as child soldiers. Like other war-torn areas, thousands of infants and children have been disabled, left homeless, orphaned or killed.

The seeds of ethnic and religious intolerance are sown early. But if a fraction of the money that is pumped into military destruction were spent on providing every child with a healthy start, seeds of animosity could

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**Figure 7**

HIV and mortality among children under five years old in selected African countries

![Graph showing HIV prevalence and under-5 mortality rates for Zambia, Kenya, and Cameroon from 1980 to 1998.]

**Note:** HIV-prevalence rate is among adults at end of 1999.

be replaced by empathy and tolerance. Early in life, children would learn about tolerance and non-violent conflict resolution. An investment in children can pay a huge peace dividend.

The effects of HIV/AIDS on early childhood

Today, 34.3 million people in the world live with HIV/AIDS, including 1.3 million children under 15 years of age. The overwhelming majority of these children were born to mothers with HIV, acquiring the virus in the womb, around the time of being born, or during breastfeeding. With their right to survive, grow and develop threatened from their very beginnings, most of these children will live shortened lives, dying before they are in their teens.

The firestorm rages most ferociously in sub-Saharan Africa, the home of 10 per cent of the world’s population, 70 per cent of the world’s HIV-infected people, 80 per cent of AIDS deaths and 90 per cent of AIDS orphans.

In some African countries, more than 10 per cent of children under 15 are now orphans. Earlier estimates that more than 13 million children worldwide would lose their mothers or both parents to AIDS by the year 2001 were passed by the end of 1999. Ninety per cent of these orphans live in sub-Saharan Africa.

And with 5.4 million new HIV infections in the world in 1999 alone, the worst is yet to come.

In Shiri-njoro (Tanzania) not far from Mount Kilimanjaro, Felicia Mbonika, a village elder and counsellor, knows intimately the waste laid by AIDS in her country. A plump woman, dressed in a multicoloured wrap, she has a soft, serene face that belies her despair. Sitting in her small house, located on the main road that runs from Arusha to Kilimanjaro, she talks about her

Effective parenting in Turkey

Only 12 per cent of children under six in Turkey benefit from ECD services since fees are prohibitive for the average Turkish family. But since 1994, the Government of Turkey and UNICEF have worked together to build a family- and community-based system of ECD as an alternative to the more expensive, centre-based pre-schools.

The Mothers’ Training Programme, operating in 24 provinces, is one part of this approach. In addition to working directly with mothers, other family members – fathers, older siblings and grandparents – also participate in the games and play activities for younger children. With all family members contributing to a more stimulating and interactive learning environment in the home, children score better in language and developmental tests. Plus the overall family environment is enhanced. In the words of one programme participant, “Now I am not hitting my child any more. My husband is not hitting me either.”

To reach as many families as possible, UNICEF joined with the media to produce a series of child development videos, The Better Parenting Initiative, covering the first eight years of a child’s life. Most parents caring for children at home are not aware of the developmental needs of early childhood. Both animated and live-action scenarios illustrate a child’s age-specific progression in language skills and in social, emotional, physical and motor development. Practical suggestions showing how parents can enhance development are acted out in exchanges between children and caregivers.

The videos reach a broad audience through national television broadcasts, and print materials linked to the videos are used to train the wide range of providers who work directly with families and young children. These video films have also become important components of the Mothers’ Training Programme, which reaches over 80,000 mothers in the country.

Photo: A photograph of a girl toddler lies in the debris of a destroyed building in the western town of Gulcuk – the epicentre of the 1999 earthquake in Turkey.
The appalling neglect to which children are exposed is glaring evidence that we live in an age of immorality. This aberration pulls us into the vortex where the words of Nietzsche seem to ring true: “Values have ceased to be worth anything.”

For all humankind, it is shameful and criminal that there are more than two hundred and fifty million exploited children in the world. We see them rummaging in garbage for a scrap of food or groping in the darkness for a place to sleep. How shameful! How have we allowed this to happen? Some of these children are forced into prostitution. Others, many of them as young as five or six, are forced to spend long, exhausting days labouring in filthy workshops. The lucky ones make a few cents. Many others work under conditions of slavery or semi-slavery, with no legal or medical protection. They suffer from infectious diseases, injuries, or amputations, and endure abuses of every kind. They are found as much in the great cities of the world as in the poorest countries. In Latin America, there are fifteen million exploited children. In our own cities, children are murdered for one hundred or two hundred dollars, or kidnapped and killed so that their organs can be sold to the world’s laboratories. The pain and the cruelty to which we have condemned these children are beyond measure! And this open wound on the streets of the world is evidence enough that part of our humanity has been eclipsed.

These children have been so mistreated that in their eyes we discern, not the natural innocence of childhood, but the fear and the deep, eternal mistrust of those forced to spend their earliest years without parents. These millions of children are denied not only the protection of their own families, but also the protection of us all, the men and women of the world who look upon their helpless-ness with indifference. The horrors of their early years will mark them for the rest of their lives.

These boys and girls know nothing of the magnificent feeling that is experienced by those of us able to contemplate a future filled with possibilities. The abandoned children of our modern societies have been so cruelly abused that they believe in nothing. And not one of us can guarantee them a life of dignity.

We cannot simply stand by and accept the wickedness of a system whose only miraculous achievement has been somehow to concentrate more than four-fifths of the world’s wealth in the hands of a fifth of the world’s population, while millions of children around the world die of hunger in the most wretched misery.

That is why we say to the world’s leaders – beg of them, demand of them! – that they fulfill the promises that each and every one of them has made. The care of our children cannot be regarded as just another task. It must be understood as the essential and only way for a faltering humankind to recover its way. No endeavour is worthier of encouragement than this one. Anything that we can do for the world’s children is imperative, urgent. Governments must understand that our destiny depends on our taking care of the world’s children during their early years; this task is crucial to the consolidation of democracy and the future of humanity.

To exercise power without humanity is to engender violence of a kind that cannot be fought against with weapons. If we are to prevail over such violence, we must create a greater sense of solidarity. It is imperative that the world’s leaders assume full responsibility for the grave task of caring for the well-being of children – protecting them and preparing them to build, alongside their brothers and sisters, a world worthy of human nobility.

The look in the eyes of these children represents the only mandate to which we must respond. The desolation of that look is a crime that calls our humanity into question.
Let us heed the words of Dostoyevsky: “We are all guilty before everybody, for everybody, and for everything.” Let us step forward to defend the rights of the world’s children, who have been denied the care they so desperately need during their earliest years.

We cannot avoid this responsibility.

These children belong to us, as if they were our own. They must become the primary motivation for our struggles, and the most genuine of our endeavours.

Ernesto Sábato, an Argentine nuclear physicist and humanist, has earned international acclaim as a novelist.

constant condolence calls to neighbours. It is not only her arthritic hip that makes these walks so difficult, but also her heavy heart. In the area where she lives, with just about 300 households, she says that she knows 15 people who have died from AIDS this year. “Almost every week, we bury someone,” says Ms. Mbonika. “I fear for the future of my country. Those dying are young people. These are the people who are supposed to be productive and continue the next generation.”

She is right. AIDS is cutting down people in the prime of their lives and ravishing Africa. Schools are losing teachers, clinics are losing health workers, companies are losing workers and children are losing parents.

Félicia Mbonika’s accounts of AIDS in her Tanzanian village bring statistics into focus. Within the last few years, this mother of grown children watched as, one by one, the members of two families in the village completely vanished. A mother died. A toddler died. Another child died. Then the father died. A variation of the pattern repeated itself in the second family, death by death.

Just down the road from her home is a house where both parents died from AIDS, says Ms. Mbonika. The household now consists of four children. The youngest is four years old, and three other children are in primary school. Their oldest brother, 19 and overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for his young siblings, married specifically so that his new wife could help.

Such stories are not unique to Tanzania. In families, villages, cities and countries all over Africa, there are countless similar stories of the devastating human toll this disease takes.

The epidemic and the economy are negatively intertwined as poverty fuels the AIDS crisis and the disease strips the coffers bare. By 2005, the costs of treatment and care related to HIV/AIDS are expected to account for one third of all government health spending in Ethiopia, more than half in Kenya and nearly two thirds in Zimbabwe.
In addition to stretching national budgets, AIDS has taken a toll on the kinship system, a network of extended family members that makes up the backbone of African societies. In Zimbabwe, where 26 per cent of all adults are infected with HIV, a government-sponsored survey in three rural communities found that of 11,514 orphans, more than 11,000 were being cared for by relatives. Most of the caregivers were poor women, widowed and over 50. The soaring numbers of children orphaned by AIDS drain the emotional and financial resources of families. In Côte d’Ivoire, for instance, when a family member has AIDS, the average household income falls by a range of 52 per cent to 67 per cent and the health costs quadruple. And as family income plummets and the cost of caring for the patient escalates, food consumption drops.

Orphaned by HIV/AIDS. Whether their parents die from AIDS or are too sick with HIV to provide the essentials of care and nurturance, children orphaned by the epidemic are likely to be malnourished, unschooled and aged beyond their years, with their rights to grow and develop fully, violated. A study in Zambia, for instance, reported that 32 per cent of orphans in cities and 68 per cent of orphans in rural areas were not enrolled in school. Children orphaned by AIDS are at greater risk of becoming HIV infected. Emotionally vulnerable, they are more likely to seek comfort in risky sexual behaviour. Financially desperate, they are more likely to be exploited, often turning to prostitution for survival.

Despite the enormous gravity of the HIV/AIDS crisis, families, villages, communities and nations have pressed on. Refusing to give in to despair, many communities have responded with courage and resourcefulness. Some of the most valiant efforts on behalf of young children have been made in the wake of this tragedy. Recognizing the importance of the first months and years of a child’s life, several African countries have

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Figure 8 Hazards to child health in the environment

**Household and community levels**

- **Biological pathogens and their vectors/reservoirs**
  - including micro-organisms in human excreta, disease vectors (e.g., mosquitoes, rats and airborne pathogens)

- **Chemical pollutants**
  - (e.g., pesticides, fertilizers, industrial wastes)

- **Inadequate quantity of natural resources**
  - (e.g., food, water and fuel)

- **Physical hazards**
  - within the house (e.g., domestic injuries) and outside the house (e.g., road traffic, flooding, mudslides)

**Household, community and higher levels**

- **Aspects of the built environment**
  - (e.g., leaded paint, poor services and security)

**Community and higher levels**

- **Natural resource degradation**
  - (e.g., soil erosion, deforestation, deteriorating air, soil and water quality)

**National and global levels**

- **Environmental problems with more indirect but long-term impacts on health and well-being**
  - (e.g., depletion of energy resources, destruction of ecosystems, global warming and ozone layer depletion)

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shown the way in caring for their youngest children during the epidemic.

In Namibia, for instance, where the number of children orphaned by AIDS increased fivefold between 1994 and 1999, the Government and UNICEF offer equipment, supplies and materials to day-care centres that provide free services to orphans. A centre receives pit latrines, tarps, crayons and paper to be used by all the children, and the orphans are assured much-needed care. And families are more likely to adopt children orphaned by AIDS because they are guaranteed free day care.54

Breaking the cycles

To break these cycles of poverty, violence and disease, interventions must come early in life, the earlier the better. ECD is the key to a full and productive life for a child and to progress for a nation. In much the way that democracy is prelude to human development, healthy children – healthy in the total sense of the word – are basic to a country’s development. The cumulative weight of the disparities perpetuated within a country destabilizes that country itself, even when it is seemingly strong. And inequities within any one country upset the balance among nations: Poor, malnourished and unhealthy children make for poor and powerless States that are then at the mercy of stronger States. As the lives of young children are short-changed, so the fortunes of countries are lost.

By investing in children in their early years of life, a country serves not only a child and a family but also the cause of sustainable development. Investing in children is among the most far-sighted decisions leaders can make.

Hunger, disease and ignorance have never been a foundation for sustained economic growth, democracy or the respect for human rights. Giving all children a good start in life helps weed out the blights choking human development. What is needed now is a renewed commitment to the rights of the child, a vision of how the world can be for children and the courage to do whatever it takes to unravel the ropes that bind generations to misery.