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 perpetrated 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.
The only
Although the particulars of their lives might differ, millions of mothers and fathers around the world, in both industrialized and developing countries, share the same story: finding and making time, investing energies, stretching resources to provide for their sons and daughters. Their days are consumed in helping their children grow strong and healthy, protecting, teaching, guiding, encouraging their talents and channelling their curiosity, delighting in their enthusiasm and their accomplishments. They search for advice and counsel from informal support networks and community agencies as they struggle, often against great odds, to do right by their children.
North of Paris, each morning, five days a week, Yacine and Sana, twin two-year-olds, come to the community crèche in Goutte d’Or, a working class neighbourhood that has been home to generations of immigrants. Awaiting them are brightly coloured cubes they learn how to stack, and paint that they daub onto large sheets of paper. In large rooms and small corners, in daily rhythms that are carefully planned by a highly trained staff, Yacine and Sana play, eat and nap. The brother and sister have been coming to the crèche since they were three months old. Their elder sister Leila, now age five, came here before them.

“The crèche is the best thing for children,” explains Fatima, their young mother, who emigrated from Morocco 15 years ago. “My two eldest never came here and I regret it,” she says. “Here, I know they are safe and they are learning French from a very young age, whereas at home we speak mostly Arabic. It will be easier for them at school later on.”

Yacine and Sana are growing up with 53 other young children, ranging in age from three months to three years old. One third of the children are from North Africa, another third are from sub-Saharan Africa – Senegal and Mali mostly – and in the remaining third, says the young woman in charge of the establishment, “there is a bit of everything.”

In this neighbourhood, as in other parts of the country, France’s crèche system offers a unique entrée into society. Here, children of different cultures and economic classes come together to learn social skills that will last a lifetime.

“Of course, it’s a bit expensive – around 40 francs per child per day – but it’s worth the sacrifice,” says Fatima. She would pay less if her household income were lower, because the financial contribution required of parents is proportionate to their income, explains the crèche director. The family allowance kitty and the city government in fact cover most of the relatively high cost of running crèches, which in 1998 was 355 francs daily per child living in Paris.

One mother at the crèche, who is unemployed and lives on social security, only pays 8 francs a day for her child, Amine. The woman, who came to France from Algeria about 10 years ago and is raising her two sons alone, is happy that the younger one was able to get a place in the crèche. “It has made it possible for me to get training to do housekeeping work and now I can look for a job,” she says. Planned for children whose parents work outside the home, or for children from one-parent families where the parent – in 90 per cent of cases the mother – has a paying job, crèches are now opening up to children whose mothers have no earned income.

The demand far outstrips the supply, in Paris especially. “Every year,” says the director, “I receive about 140 requests for only about 20 available places.” In the capital city, approximately 280 community crèches enrolled just under 20,000 children in 1999. The story is much the same throughout France. These popular community crèches, run by an accredited, well-trained staff, are inundated. In 1999, they were able to care for only 120,000 of the approximately 2 million children in the country who were under the age of three.

In addition to the problem of not enough places, some criticisms have been voiced about the community crèche system. In France, a country with one of the highest levels of paid employment among women, crèches can no longer keep pace with the
increasing flexibility and demands of the job market. Usually open from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. and closed on Saturdays and Sundays, they no longer respond adequately to the childcare needs of parents who work staggered hours. In June 1999, France’s Prime Minister announced a modernization plan that included 60,000 new spaces by 2004 and longer hours.

Other forms of childcare do exist. There are day-care centres where children can be left for a few hours each day or each week, childminders accredited by a municipality to take care of children in their own homes and crèches established by parents’ organizations. But the community crèche continues to hold a strong appeal, particularly among low-income families.

Young immigrant mothers, for example, search out a crèche as one of their first points of contact with France. Fathers also come, but less often, although some routinely drop off their children at the crèche or pick them up at the end of the day. During back-to-school week, some mothers stay at the crèche for about an hour a day to ease the children’s transition from the family home to a still unfamiliar place. Other mothers come quickly when staff contact them if their child shows signs of having a problem.

The care the crèche offers is comprehensive, fusing health, nutrition and social services. In addition to doctors’ visits, there are regular sessions with teachers and psychologists. “Apart from its educational functions, the crèche plays a very important role in detecting and preventing children’s problems, which is especially crucial for families in difficult situations,” emphasizes the coordinator of the neighbourhood crèches. “Our work with the parents is every bit as important as the work we do with the children to help them become more integrated.”

**Programmes that work**

With some notable exceptions, Sweden for example, the systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of ECD has only just begun. To date, there are no comparable national studies that connect ECD to improvements in either the psychosocial development of
There is also the fundamental question of how, if at all, to measure change in the ‘whole child’. Reasons for this vary: There is little consensus on the best indicators of change in a child’s psychosocial development, nor is there systematic monitoring of programmes. Definitions of the age group under study differ (for example, 0-3 years, 0-6 years, 0-8 years), as do the definitions of ECD.

Panel 7: Respecting the rights of the Indian child

Children under 1 year
- Health check-ups
- Immunization
- Growth promotion and supplementary feeding
- Referral services

Children 1-3 years
- Health check-ups
- Immunization
- Growth promotion and supplementary feeding
- Referral services

Children 3-6 years
- Health check-ups
- Immunization
- Growth promotion and supplementary feeding
- Referral services

Adolescent girls (11-18 years)
Pregnant women
Breastfeeding mothers


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research, economic policy and budget allocations.

Despite such limitations, there is a considerable body of evidence, collected over 25 years of local and subnational programming by a number of organizations, to support every aspect of ECD and every argument in its favour. The cumulative effect of the many positive changes that flow from ECD, however constituted and at whatever scale, has been to raise consciousness about ECD programmes and increase the demand for more.

ECD has saved millions of lives and improved millions more. There is little dispute that early health and nutrition interventions in a child’s life, or in the life of a mother, make a significant difference in the child’s long-term survival, growth and development. In addition, the success of immunization and literacy campaigns in saving young lives and improving the health status and social well-being of generations has been extensively documented, as has the relationship between improved nutritional status of pregnant women and the improved health status of the child. The life-saving effects of clean water and improved sanitation practices, demonstrated in village after village and country after country, are close to being a universal truism.

Grand-scale programmes. In both industrialized and developing countries, national pre-school programmes have been so clearly good for so many children for so many years that some are being extended to include younger children and others are being looked to as models by other countries. A study in Ontario (Canada), for example, called for a provincial ‘first tier’ programme for early childhood development that would be as important to preparing the children of Ontario for success as are school systems at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary level. The community-based programme is proposed as an antidote to what the authors describe as “the real brain drain,” i.e., investing more in children after they are six years old than before, despite the fact that the major brain development happens before a child is three.\(^5^6\) Ontario is far from alone in seeking to prudently align investments with opportunity, as country after country around the world expands its early childhood programmes.\(^5^7\)
And then there are models that might well be called the ‘grandparents’ of them all. In Sweden, considered to have one of the most advanced childcare systems in the world, local governments subsidize childcare for nearly half the children in the country from when they are born until they enter school. Day-care centres and family childcare homes are well funded and regulated, well staffed with highly trained workers and designed with the child’s developmental needs in mind. Studies, regularly and systemically conducted, consistently find that the girls and boys who spend their earliest years in Sweden’s day-care system grow to be creative, socially confident and independent adolescents.58

Since 1959, Cuba has incrementally built a national system of day-care centres and early childhood and pre-school education programmes that today reaches 98.3 per cent of the children in the 0-6 age group. In 1992, Cuba, with support from UNICEF, created Educa a Tu Hijo (Educate Your Child) as a national programme of community-based

*Figure 9* Third-graders’ scores on mathematics tests

*With a median score of 350 points in a third-grade mathematics test (around 90% correct answers), Cuba is 100 points ahead of the regional average.*

Source: Juan Casassus et al., *Primer estudio internacional comparativo sobre lenguaje, matemática y factores asociados en tercero y cuarto grado* (First international comparative study on language, mathematics and associated factors in third and fourth grade), Latin American Laboratory for the Evaluation of Education Quality, UNESCO Santiago, 1998.
services for young children and their families. Depending on over 14,000 promoters and more than 60,000 volunteers, the programme reaches 600,000+ children in this age group, including 440,000+ young girls, and their families.

Future mothers and fathers receive information and counselling about healthy pregnancies and child development during health visits to doctors and nurses. Families with children under two years of age are visited once or twice a week and guided through activities that enhance their babies' development. Children between age two and four and their families go on weekly or semi-weekly group outings to parks, cultural facilities and sports centres with counsellors trained in child development and family participation. And five- to six-year-old boys and girls from mountainous, rural and remote areas travel to primary schools with their families for classes and family discussions once or twice a week.

Cuba has developed its approach to early childhood care through both traditional and participatory research, the latter method further engaging families and communities in the responsibilities of early childhood. The Cuban system has had measurable success in increasing the developmental and educational achievements of Cuba's children. A 1998 comparative study of third- and fourth-graders in 11 Latin American countries, for example, found that Cuban children scored significantly higher in third-grade mathematics and third- and fourth-grade Spanish than their counterparts (see Figure 9).

Another long-standing success story is in the United States, where the national Head Start programme began in 1965. This massive venture involves approximately 1.3 million individual volunteers and 1,400 community-based non-profit organizations and school systems in providing comprehensive developmental services to approximately 800,000 children ages three to five and social services for their families. Over the last 35 years, Head Start has prepared nearly 18 million young children for later success in school with graduates of Head Start performing at above expected levels in early literacy, numeracy and social skills (see Figure 10).

In 1994, Early Head Start expanded on the original programme to include families with children under three years and pregnant women. It includes comprehensive health services including services to women before, during and after pregnancy, nutrition, early education in and out of the home and

**Figure 10** Head Start programme conceptual framework

![Image of Head Start programme conceptual framework]

parent education. In fiscal year 1999, funding for both Head Starts was $4.66 billion.

Costs and funding

The cost of an ECD programme depends on the nature and extent of the services it offers. In general, centre-based programmes cost five times more than home-based ones, and the more comprehensive the programme, the more it costs. Food supplies in the form of meals and snacks can account for up to 40 per cent of a programme’s costs.

India’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was estimated in 1994 to cost 27 cents a day for each child. During the same year, the Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar programme in Colombia, operating in 55,000 sites and offering full day care including food, was estimated to cost 38 cents a day. Other programmes may cost much less, because they involve fewer components or because the voluntary participation of the community is greater.

There are various ways to finance ECD. In Sweden, for example, the programme is totally publicly funded. In some countries, such as Colombia, the national Government assumes most of the financial responsibility for implementing ECD, although parents pay half of the caregivers’ stipends in addition to their social security contributions. In India, where parents’ contributions are minimal, the national Government finances most ICDS activities, except for food, which is paid for and administered by state governments.

On the other hand, in Kenya’s Early Child Education programme, the national Government finances only the training of caregivers, while local governments provide and maintain care centres and parents pay the caregivers’ stipends. In 1993, parents in Bolivia’s Integrated Child Development Project paid a flat monthly fee of $2.50 for their first child, with decreasing amounts for each additional child enrolled. In Thailand, loans paid back to village loan funds, which are financed by an NGO, are funneled into a capital fund to support early childhood development programmes in the community.

Although new monies are needed to guarantee every child the best possible start in life, adequate care for babies and toddlers does not necessarily call for massive expenditures or the creation of new programmes. Resources to improve the cognitive development of young children through stimulation, play and affection can be found within the community. Sithuwama, Sri Lanka’s home-
visiting programme, illustrates cost-effective early childhood care. Volunteers trained in early childhood development are the backbone of the programme. Each volunteer, a respected woman from the community, works with five families. She spends time in the homes, teaching parents how to help their children grow physically and develop mentally.

A multisectoral approach, in which health, education, nutrition and development components come together, can add to a programme’s cost-effectiveness. But more important than saving money, this convergence of services focuses on the whole child rather than a compartmentalized child and, in so doing, reinforces and complements how a child develops.

ECD’s positive influences resonate throughout a society. Creating early childhood services not only provides infants and toddlers with good care, it also frees girls from looking after their younger siblings and opens up opportunities for them to attend school. It also frees mothers for entry into the labour market. It creates new job opportunities for people providing household day care or involved in home-visiting programmes. The child benefits from receiving basic services as well as from playing, singing and dancing. The family benefits from added income. The community benefits from additional jobs and workers for the labour market.

A costly mistake

Priyanthi, whose children have benefited from the ECD programme in Sri Lanka, doesn’t need cold facts and complex examples of the advantages of giving all children a good start.
**Wawa Wasi for working parents in Peru**

In Peru, where more than half the people live in poverty, work a 10-hour day away from their homes and children and, even then, do not earn an income sufficient to cover their basic necessities, Wawa Wasi, ‘Children’s Homes’, is filling a pressing need.

A low-cost, low-income day-care programme set up to serve 150,000 children nationwide, Wawa Wasi began in 1993 as a collaboration between UNICEF and Peru’s Ministry of Education. The programme has since expanded to create day-care centres in as many as 20,000 homes with the support of a $150 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank and cooperation with the European Union and local grass-roots organizations.

For a small fee, working mothers leave their children who are under three years old in a day-care home where there is a ‘mother-in-charge’, trained in health care, early childhood stimulation and basic nutrition. Meals in the Wawa Wasi, most of which are located in shanty towns of urban areas, are organized through communal kitchens or ‘Glass of Milk’ committees that take the burden of cooking off the main caregivers.

Wawa Wasi is exemplary on many levels: It has created quality basic services that meet the local community’s needs, it fosters social inclusion and it boosts the physical, social and cognitive skills of children. It will create jobs for 19,000 caregivers.
hood interventions. Following pre-school participants over the long term showed the lasting benefits of a strong beginning. By age 27, the former pre-schoolers earned more money, had a higher percentage of home ownership, had completed more schooling and had fewer arrests.60

A study of poor Brazilian children also demonstrated the cost return of early childhood care. Poor girls who had attended pre-school were twice as likely to reach grade 5 and three times as likely to reach grade 8 as girls who did not. Poor boys who attended pre-school were three times more likely to reach grade 5 than boys who had not. And 40 per cent of poor boys who attended pre-school finished primary school, compared to 2 per cent of boys who had not been involved in early educational programmes. Based on studies of the effectiveness of Brazil’s early childhood care, it is estimated that boys who attend pre-school for two years will increase their earning power as adults.61

ECD’s benefits are not always easily seen unless one knows where to look and what to look for. Fast, visible results often drive budgetary decisions while, in contrast, the outcome of a healthy, productive, caring child remains hidden for some years in the privacy of a family.

Nor is ECD the ‘quick fix’ that garners political favour. The wide-reaching pay-off of providing adequate nutrition, clean water, good sanitation, primary health care and opportunities for sensory experiences is sometimes not seen for a generation. But, eventually and without fail, ECD’s benefits become obvious.

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**Figure 11** Debt overshadows basic social services

- **Basic social services**
- **External debt**

So why not?
Programmes that work, outstanding returns on investment, ways to meet legal and moral commitments all beg the question: If early childhood care is such a far-sighted and wise choice for countries, why the failure to invest adequate resources to guarantee every child the best possible start in life?

Standing in the way of ECD are the unanswered calls for economic and social policy reforms in both industrialized and developing countries that would allow the financial resources for developing countries to increase their investment in children in general and early childhood in particular.

Commitment to the 20/20 Initiative.
Early childhood care for survival, growth and development is just an empty phrase unless governments in developing countries allocate sufficient resources from their national budgets to basic social services, and donors do the same. The 20/20 Initiative sets the indicative share for both funding sources at 20 per cent. Few countries invest the amounts needed in basic social services, and few donors direct more than 10 per cent of their aid budget to these services. In more than 30 countries the average investment is between 12 per cent and 14 per cent of the national budgets – far short of adequate. The Initiative not only recommends increased spending on basic social services but it also specifically argues for spending that is efficient and promotes equality. In many instances, the richest fifth of the population receives, on average, twice as much support in health and education as the poorest fifth.62 As a result, a family’s poverty is passed from generation to generation, and the same is so for a country’s stalled development.

An additional investment of $80 billion per year – less than a fifth of 1 per cent of global income and an amount available...
through the 20/20 Initiative - would ensure every baby a good start in life. It would secure for every child the basic social services that are critical: clean water and sanitation, primary health care and basic education. It would give every child the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. The international community cannot wait until poverty is eliminated to invest in children. Investment in basic social services and early childhood care is a government’s best strategy for eliminating impoverishment in its next generation.

**Debt relief.** Many countries spend more money on debt servicing than on basic social services. In Tanzania, nearly 50 per cent of the budget goes to external debt and approximately 10 per cent to social services. With so little of Tanzania’s budget available for education, it is unlikely that Febronia and Damas’ children will finish primary school. Heavy national debt is stealing basic care from children. The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, launched in 1996 by IMF and the World Bank, brought together creditors to reduce the debt burden of these countries. By 2000, the Initiative had provided debt relief for four countries: Bolivia, Guyana, Mozambique and Uganda. Changing debt liability to investment in children is key to ending poverty. Uganda, the first country to receive HIPC support, has led the way by using its debt dividend to expand primary education, enrolment and care for AIDS orphans.

**Needed now more than ever.** All sectors of the international community have made the case for budget restructuring and debt relief and argued for it repeatedly. There is little new in the arguments – but for the ever more urgent needs of children and women as generations and continents are lost to disease and violence. In the face of the realities of life for millions of children, the failure to respond as is needed seems an increasingly callous stance for governments to take.

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**Converging services in the Philippines**

In Capagao, a poor village in Capiz Province that is one of 42,000 villages in the Philippines, barangay (village) health workers make certain that children get to the nearby health station for their immunizations and health check-ups by taking them there themselves. At the station, a house-by-house map tracks every child’s growth, access to iodized salt and other micronutrients and the availability of clean water and a toilet. Those children suffering from malnutrition and diarrhoea receive oral rehydration salts from a midwife or barangay health worker.

Down the village’s one dirt road, a small thatched hut serves as a health and nutrition post. Here, two health workers weigh 40 children under the age of five every month, and give vitamin A supplements to lactating women and supplemental feedings to malnourished infants and young children. They also counsel parents on child health, nutrition and development issues.

This cluster of services is part of the Fourth and Fifth Country Programme for Children, a pioneering and innovative cooperation between the Philippine Government and UNICEF. Since 1996, the programme has provided comprehensive health, nutrition and early education services to the 14 regions of the Philippines with the highest population of marginalized and disadvantaged children under five years of age.

An intergovernmental initiative of the Departments of Health, Education and Social Welfare, the programme capitalizes on pre-existing primary health interventions including the expanded programme on immunization, the WHO/UNICEF Integrated Management of Childhood Illness Initiative, micronutrient supplementation and Safe Motherhood. The ECD component is locally run and includes day care, primary education, parent ‘effectiveness’ education and a strong training component for those providing day care and childcare and for rural health midwives and barangay health workers.

With support from the national Government, UNICEF, the Australian Agency for International Development, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, provincial and local governments throughout the Philippines are establishing health and nutrition posts as part of the country’s commitment to ECD. In Capiz Province alone, 200 are already in place.
Fundamental changes
ECD is the necessary first step to making life better for children but, in itself, it is not enough. Fundamental changes are in order, and certain traditions that reinforce the unacceptable status quo must be challenged and put to rest, if the rights and best interests of the child are to be advanced.

The ‘non-personhood’ of the youngest.
Two billion of the world’s 6 billion people live in constant risk of having their needs overlooked, their opinions discounted, their

There is considerable evidence that women’s education and literacy tend to reduce the mortality rates of children. The influence works through many channels, but perhaps most immediately, it works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of the children, and the opportunity the mothers have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction. Similarly, women’s empowerment appears to have a strong influence in reducing the much observed gender bias in survival (particularly against young girls).

Women’s political, social and economic roles
Indeed, the empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today. The factors involved include women’s education, their ownership pattern, their employment opportunities and the workings of the labour market. But going beyond these rather ‘classic’ variables, they include also the nature of the employment arrangements, attitudes of the family and of the society at large toward women’s economic activities, and the economic and social circumstances that encourage or resist change in these attitudes. As Naila Kabeer’s illuminating study of the work and economic involvement of Bangladeshi women in Dhaka and London brings out, the continuation of, or break from, past arrangements is strongly influenced by the exact economic and social relations that operate in the local environment.* The changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination as well as consequences closely relate to many of the central features of the development process.


Photo: A woman with her sleeping baby in an adult literacy class, part of a UNICEF-supported project in the slum area of El Tobgaye, Alexandria, Egypt.

Amartya Sen is the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge (United Kingdom), and the winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.
rights abused or their well-being threatened, simply because they are under 18 years of age. Without voice or vote, children and adolescents have few ways to influence the world outside their families. As a result, adults rarely take notice that one third of the world’s population is treated this way regularly, quietly, pervasively and destructively. Among these ‘non-persons’ are infants and babies, the youngest and the most ignored of all.

In 33 countries of the world, more than half of the children are not even registered at birth. Even in countries with birth registration, children of ethnic minorities and children born with disabilities are often ignored. One third of all births each year, some 40 million babies, are not registered. For all intents and purposes, these children are non-persons in the eyes of the State, unrecorded for planning purposes and invisible when policy and budget decisions are being made.

Meanwhile, in the most dysfunctional homes, young children are often silent witnesses to violence and abuse or are themselves victims without recourse. But even in stable environments, myths and misperceptions of an adult-centric world about what children can see, hear or understand limit a child’s development.

In ways that are the norm, villages and cities are built around politically favoured projects, such as subsidized, high-cost urban water systems for wealthy neighbourhoods or specialist medical facilities, with monies that could and should have been spent on the needs of children. Laws are passed and public policies implemented without accounting for their effect on the lives of children. National measures of economic, social and human development are taken, monitored and ranked without close scrutiny of the status of child development.

All this despite the nearly universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of

A media culture in Maldives - for and about children

One query that surfaces again and again in discussions among UNICEF and its programme partners in Maldives is “How do UNICEF’s ECD strategies and programmes translate into something that is doable and concrete?” In a country such as Maldives, with low infant and child mortality rates and high rates of literacy and school enrolment, the answer is to go directly to caretakers with simple information on child development – information that extends beyond issues of survival and towards the social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual development of the child.

The Maldives ECD project uses a multimedia approach to reach households in this archipelago of 1,200 tiny islands scattered over 90,000 sq. km of ocean. An important objective is to create a media culture in which children are told they are valued, regularly see themselves portrayed in the media, are encouraged to express themselves and have these expressions valued from infancy.

After conducting a baseline survey of existing knowledge, attitudes and practices, programme partners used the information in developing a variety of materials for children and their caretakers. The materials integrate child rights, with a focus on developing children’s confidence and self-esteem, as well as gender issues into ECD. Several of the prototype materials reverse gender stereotypes by portraying girls in active roles, boys performing household chores and men nurturing and caring for their children.

In addition to promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities in all their materials, the Maldives project is focusing on another often unacknowledged but highly important group: adolescents. The project provides older siblings with ways to help stimulate the development of their younger brothers and sisters while watching over them.

The Maldives project aims to raise the status of ECD so that it becomes a key indicator for assessing progress and development at the island, atoll and national levels.
The importance of early detection – the case of Jordan

Nine-year-old Sahar is a third-grader in preparatory school in Jordan. She has lots of friends and a ready smile – and a hearing aid.

When she was an infant, Sahar was wrongly diagnosed as suffering from mental disability as well as hearing problems. As a result, she was not allowed to interact with other children. Her family neither invested in her development nor provided her with proper nutrition.

Sahar is a living example of the importance of detecting disabilities early in a child’s life. Since 1993, the Community-based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme has worked closely with parents, teachers and community volunteers in Al-Mafraq, the expansive northern territory in Jordan, to change attitudes towards disabilities. Parents learn to recognize disabilities and seek help for their children, teachers are especially trained, young women volunteers are recruited to work closely with young children with disabilities and community members assume administrative responsibilities for the programme.

The CBR project is part of national efforts to support ‘better parenting’ in homes, where three quarters of Jordan’s children are cared for, by increasing the knowledge and skills of all caregivers concerning child rights and the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the child.

Whereas previously children had their disabilities either wrongly diagnosed, like Sahar, or even hidden due to a ‘culture of shame’, there has been a marked change in areas where the CBR project is in place. Parents of children with disabilities now inform and seek assistance from committees set up to help them. Schools integrate children with disability into their classes. And a 1997 survey showed that 80 per cent of the local population’s attitudes towards the rights of people with special needs had changed for the better.

And what about the other 20 per cent? They said they already believed that the disabled had rights in the community, but CBR had strengthened those beliefs.

The relative powerlessness of women.

Women’s relative powerlessness in society makes them more likely to be infected with HIV, more vulnerable to violence and abuse in their homes and communities and easier targets in armed conflicts. It also plays a major role in how children are cared for within their homes, in who makes the decisions about them and how they are provided for when policies are drafted, laws made and budgets constructed.

Resource allocation at the family level forces the covert issue of gender discrimination out into the open. Studies in both industrialized and developing countries show that mothers put more of their incomes into their households and into meeting children’s needs than do fathers. Research in Kenya and Malawi found a strongly positive correlation between women’s control of their income and a household’s caloric intake. In many countries, programmes that empower women lead to improvements in children’s lives: In the Chicontepec project for indigenous girls and women in Mexico, for example, women’s groups that came together around a water project eventually worked for their families’ rights to food, health, education and improvements in their homes and incomes.

One could expect that, given the opportunity, women would work diligently to move governments to support basic social services for children and families. But gender discrimination keeps women away from policy-making and the decisions that define the conditions of their lives, such as allocating budgets for basic social services and setting educational policies that promote gender equality. It is a pervasive gender bias that...
keeps women out of the public sphere and relegates them to the private struggles — of maintaining families, caring for children and sustaining themselves. These struggles mark the days and nights of Priyanthi and Febronia and the millions like them throughout the world. No matter how hard they try to do otherwise or how deeply they care for their children, women, with relatively little power over their own lives, are likely to pass on their poverty to their daughters and sons.

Gender discrimination is one of the first lessons in life and one that is repeated almost incessantly within the family, in schools and in communities until it seems like natural law. It can and must be unlearned in these same arenas as insistently as it is taught and replaced by an environment in which boys and girls are equally valued, equally cared for and equally educated, if a country is to have any chance of sustaining the development of its people and fulfilling the rights of all its citizens.

Acceptance of weak leadership and blurred accountability. The distance from poor rural communities and urban slums to the seats of power is huge. With rare exceptions, the interests of the officials and government decision makers are focused far from those of babies and families in their own countries. And the distance is still farther when the children are in another country and another region of the globe.

In the majority of countries in the world, strong leadership on matters related to how a child survives, grows and develops couldn’t be less visible. The voices of power are uncharacteristically silent about the lives of

Programmes that empower women lead to improvements in children’s lives.

The only responsible choice 61
women and families, and the great divide between public affairs and private matters is rarely bridged. Now the well-being of children and adolescents must become the measure of a country's progress and a leader's accomplishments.

“... no task nobler than giving children a better future.”

The lives of children and women are the truest indicators of the strength of communities and nations. If the youngest and most vulnerable are left to find their way alone, a country violates the rights of its people and sabotages its future as an equal partner in the global economy. Weak and dependent children and women make for weak and dependent countries. In dramatic contrast, children and women empowered by their rights make for robust and self-sufficient societies.

Comprehensive early childhood care is a key to creating a world characterized by hope and change rather than by deprivation and despair and to building countries that are thriving and free. When the UN General Assembly’s Special Session on Children convenes in September 2001, the world's leadership will have the opportunity to stake a claim in a legacy of equality and human development.

First and foremost, they must recommit themselves, without reservation, excuse or equivocation, to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They must do the same for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Second, they must make children – the youngest most especially – the priority at all policy tables, in all programme planning and all budget meetings.

Third, they must ensure ECD the necessary financial and political support at all levels including at the community and local levels.

Fourth, they must delegate responsibility and assign accountability for ensuring three interrelated outcomes for every child: the best possible start in life, a good-quality basic education and the opportunities to develop fully and to participate in meaningful ways in his or her community.

From now until the Special Session on Children. There are two Substantive Sessions still to come in preparation for the 2001 gathering, in January and June 2001, and a series of reviews and policy discussions at subnational, national and regional levels during that same period. These meetings provide individuals and organizations who are concerned with the rights of children to do several things:

- Hold government leaders accountable for their participation in the United Nations meeting and for the actions they pledge at the Session;
- Make certain that children’s perspectives and the views of NGOs are included in all aspects of the review process and in determining priorities for the future;
- Participate in reviews and policy discussions at various levels and publicize when, where and why they are happening;
- Share research and experiences on the lives of children and women;
- Support children and adolescents in their efforts to be heard in the process;
- Mobilize now to follow up on the decisions and action plans that come out of the meeting.

The best possible start in life. The Special Session on Children is one event in the ongoing process of making the world a better place for children, adolescents and the adults that surround them. Breaking the intergener-
ational transmission of poverty, violence, disease and discrimination is not an unreachable dream if we start early enough in a child's life. Investing in the world's youngest citizens, as part of the effort to ensure their rights, is the best choice among several – great for children and their parents and caretakers, even better for their countries. In the final analysis, making certain that every child has the best possible start in life, which is the legal and morally right thing to do, is the only reasonable choice for responsible leadership.
References

Choices to be made


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A necessary choice


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43. Ibid., p. 124.

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