An unprecedented opportunity

Let us consider a scenario – one in which the world has gone that extra mile to ensure that children, regardless of the country in which they live, their household income, gender, ethnicity or location, have access to essential services and are protected. Countries have made the efforts to reach the last 5 or 10 per cent of children who had been excluded or invisible and are, in many cases, the hardest to reach. Every single child is in school, with all the empowerment and protection against abuse that this implies. Every child is immunized against the main killer diseases, benefiting from the new vaccines currently considered too expensive to be offered to all.¹ No infant loses their life for want of a few simple, inexpensive doses of oral rehydration salts. No child is locked away from the world in a workshop, labouring in conditions approaching slavery.

The benefits of such a world accrue not only to the children but to the whole of humanity. Premature death or debilitating diseases become altogether less of a drag upon the momentum of development. The despair of extreme poverty and the disruption and destruction wreaked by conflict are markedly reduced. Economies benefit as workforces become healthier and more skilled, more adaptable to the challenges of technology and modernity. Democratic systems become more vibrant and sustained as more literate, informed voters demand to have an active voice in the decision-making processes in their countries and keep corruption and authoritarianism in check. Above all, the energy and creativity of children and young people can be channelled into their own development and into their full, active participation in society instead of dissipated in a desperate struggle to survive.

This would indeed be a world fit for children. It may seem impossibly far away, but...
it is as simple as this: We must do every-
thing in our power to keep our commit-
ments to children. These commitments are
clear and unambiguous. What is required
now is the understanding that a commit-
ment is a pledge with both moral and prac-
tical obligations. In a moral sense, a
commitment signifies a relationship of duty.
In practical terms, a commitment binds
those making it to a course of action. This
was implicitly recognized at the Millennium
Summit in 2000, which translated fine
words and noble aspirations into time-
bound development objectives in the
Millennium Declaration – against which
the world’s leaders undertook to be meas-
ured and held accountable.

Politics has been described as the art of the
possible. The wonder of the Millennium
agenda is that politicians and international
organizations have embraced the pledge to
make it possible – by 2015 – for every child
in the world to complete primary schooling,
to cut child mortality rates by two thirds and
maternal mortality rates by three quarters,
and to not only halt, but send into retreat
HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major dis-
eases. In a world with a global economy
worth US$60 trillion and rising, all these
goals and the other aims of the Millennium
agenda are eminently attainable. As humani-
ty continues to push through the frontiers of
knowledge, and science advances further
every day – from mapping the human
genome to comprehending the origins of the
universe – could it really be impossible dur-
ing the next 10 years to banish child hunger
or to keep children from dying of something
as easily preventable as diarrhoea?

**Reaching all children depends on creative
and effective partnerships**

Making this possible will require more than
political will or well-intentioned strategies.
No government, agency or organization can
achieve these goals by itself; the Millennium
agenda will not be realized without effec-
tive, creative and consistent partnerships.
Partnering means working in solidarity, not
just theoretically but practically. And it
requires, as the United Nations Secretary-
General’s report on enhancing cooperation
between the UN and all relevant partners
outlines, “voluntary and collaborative rela-
tionships in which all parties agree to work
together to achieve a common purpose or
undertake a specific task and to share risks,
responsibilities, resources, competencies
and benefits.”

There are thousands of people and organi-
zations working on behalf of children
around the world, each with its own focus,
strength and orientation. But a growing
global constituency is uniting around the
Convention on the Rights of the Child, the
Millennium Declaration, the Millennium
Development Goals and ‘A World Fit for
Children’. Only by pooling strengths can we
create a movement with a global voice and
political weight that reflects the depth and
breadth of these commitments. The children
of the world, especially those who so often
miss out on the opportunities they need to
grow and thrive, the excluded and the
invisible, are counting on us.

The concept of partnership is fundamental
to UNICEF, whose history provides a
powerful illustration of how people and
organizations working together, sharing
resources and building on one another’s
ideas can create synergies that produce
larger – and more effective – results than
might otherwise be imagined. In its found-
ing resolution from the General Assembly, UNICEF was charged to work with relief
and child welfare organizations, relation-
The majority of the 115 million children out of school are girls. Sustainable development and the eradication of poverty will only be achieved with quality education for all girls and boys alike. A ‘business as usual’ approach is not an option if universal primary education and gender equality in education are to be achieved by 2015. Since girls face much greater obstacles, additional efforts are needed to get them in school and ensure that they complete their education. One such effort is the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI).

Launched at the World Forum on Education for All in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000, this global movement for girls’ education is an unprecedented partnership that embraces stakeholders and actors at all levels. The movement is being convened by UNICEF and encompasses a broad spectrum of partners who share the same commitment, including governments, UN agencies, donors, development agencies, NGOs, civil-society organizations, the private sector, religious groups, parents, teachers, communities and student organizations.

Rather than creating separate mechanisms and programmes, UNGEI’s working principles are based on coordination, pooled resources and strategic alliances that create the synergy needed for maximum impact of girls’ education interventions. UNGEI advocates at global, regional and country levels to influence decision-making and investments that ensure gender equity and equality in national education policies, plans and programmes. The partnership mobilizes resources for projects and country programmes as well as large-scale initiatives targeted at the education system. Its efforts complement and are integrated into existing development structures such as poverty-reduction strategies, sector-wide approaches and United Nations development assistance frameworks.

**Making UNGEI work at the country level**

Strong partnerships and effective participation in sector-wide processes are required to bolster girls’ education at the national level. This process begins with the creation of an UNGEI task force within a country to articulate the importance and effectiveness of its projects and programmes in achieving gender parity in education. UNGEI’s plan of action for girls’ education includes multiple interventions and initiatives to engage the government and local partners in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes and projects.

National strategies to narrow the gender gap in education and to ensure all children obtain their right to quality basic education fall into two major categories: targeted and systematic interventions.

- **Targeted interventions** are usually small scale and focus on particular population groups, geographic regions or specific areas of the education system. They are often pilot-ed by civil-society organizations with stand-alone or coordinated funding mechanisms. Targeted interventions may also be large-scale projects that are conducted nationally or across multiple sites within the country.

- **Systematic interventions** are usually larger in scale and are designed to influence the education system and to serve most population groups. They are frequently joint projects between donor agencies and governments and are usually implemented countrywide or regionally.

Engaging partners is essential to achieving gender equality in education. UNGEI partners work together on targeted and systematic interventions with the goal of building national capacity rather than creating parallel structures. Partner agencies strive to be transparent and realistic about their comparative advantages. Each partner aims to be clear on what it has to offer the initiative, based on its strengths and resources.

See References, page 94.
and enabled in making their capacities and vulnerabilities known and acted upon.5

As part of the United Nations, UNICEF is engaged in the reform process that is redefining the ways UN agencies will work together at all levels to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization. This reflects a new and growing recognition throughout the world that development must involve all actors to be truly effective and sustainable. Boldness and speed are required to strengthen existing partnerships, build new ones and create new mechanisms of accountability. Time is of the essence, not only because the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals is only a decade away, but because millions of children today will miss out on a childhood if we do not act now.

The lives of excluded and invisible children will depend on the actions we take now

Effective partnerships will provide the foundation for achieving the Millennium agenda, which will bring a marked improvement to the lives of millions of children and is a step towards our ultimate aim: creating a world in which every child enjoys a childhood – protected, cared for and loved by their parents, families and communities. This is possible, but only with the support of national and global partners working together to ensure that children’s needs are met and their rights protected under all circumstances. Links between partners will be strengthened as each actor responds to the challenge – from government leaders establishing budgets to voluntary agencies working in slums, from the media as they influence social priorities to communities caring for their children, and from entrepreneurs showing social responsibility to the children themselves, whose talents and energies are just waiting to be released.

It is a bitter irony that the children most at risk of being bypassed by the global march against poverty and disease, illiteracy and exploitation are those whose rights are most abused and undervalued. It is time to reach out to them – not just to those already living on the margins but also to future generations. We must be their partners – not only seeking to include and protect them but also to empower them – with the knowledge that realizing the Millennium Declaration’s vision of a world of peace, equity, tolerance, security, freedom, respect for the environment and shared responsibility depends on ensuring that no child is excluded or invisible.