

PART III:

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

Lessons learned from the past decade

What is striking about the aftermath of the World Summit for Children is the time it has taken to translate political consensus into effective action. For many reasons, we do not always quickly apply what we know.

A decade ago, the World Summit Declaration and Plan of Action emphasized the importance of pursuing child-specific actions in national policies and plans, of supporting the efforts of parents and caregivers, of empowering young people with knowledge and resources and of mobilizing all sectors of society to achieve results for children. The leaders at the World Summit also recognized the dire threat of HIV/AIDS and gave high priority to the prevention and treatment of this disease.

Yet a gap remained between promise and action. Its consequences are most apparent in the death march of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its devastating effects on the survival and development of children in the worst-affected regions. But they are also evident across the whole range of children's rights, including health, education, recreation and participation.

Why has this been so? Why have we seen lasting advances for children in some areas of activity and such halting progress in others?

The lesson of the last decade is that it is not enough for leaders to promise something, even when the resources are available to back it up, unless the whole of society is mobilized to achieve the goal. The most striking advances towards the goals of the World Summit for Children – first in immunization, then in polio eradication, salt iodization, vitamin A supplementation, guinea worm eradication and, in some regions, school enrolment – were achieved through this combination of strong partnerships and sustained political commitment, involving the broadest possible range of people.

Experience in the 1990s also shows that applying explicit child-rights principles can strengthen implementation. This was not fully appreciated in 1990, when concern focused much more on achieving ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child than on how the principles within the Convention could be applied. But the idea of child rights is dynamic – it changes us and the way we approach things. And recent years have produced many positive examples of child-rights principles being

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applied to practical action. These include community-led monitoring for reducing child malnutrition in South Asia and East Africa; special efforts to provide relevant education to minority populations in semi-arid areas; legal reform to improve the treatment of children in custody and in courts in South America; and initiatives by ‘child-friendly cities’ in Asia to ensure high rates of immunization and to protect children from the sex trade.

Children’s goals and human rights

It has also become clear that children’s rights and specific child-related development goals are best pursued within the broader framework of human rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights conventions have emerged as powerful legal instruments for achieving this – as well as for providing an ethical framework. At the same time, women’s status and well-being are now widely understood to be central both to human development and to the realization of children’s rights. Grossly unequal gender relations not only deny girls and women their rights, they also directly undermine the growth and development prospects of children.

Development and democratic processes at all levels of society are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Transparent and accountable government, in

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particular, is an essential condition for securing the rights and development of children. High-quality governance depends on commitment to human rights, including the rule of law, the reduction of

impunity and the impartiality of the judiciary. Governments must also guarantee comprehensive access to a basic set of public services, including protection from violence and aggression. Families and civil society organizations have shown that – with the appropriate support – they can take a lead role in promoting and protecting the rights of children. In the 1990s, the reform of legislation and codes relating to children in many countries gave great – and sometimes unexpected – impetus to public sector accountability and awareness of children’s rights.

Historically, adults who have injured, abused, killed, trafficked in or otherwise exploited children for profit or satisfaction have rarely been called to account. Developments in recent years give some hope that this disregard is ending and demonstrate the powerful role of judicial systems in preventing and dealing with violence against children. Where national legislation to end impunity is combined with local mobilization and broad awareness of illegality, it is possible to curb violence and abuse against children. Two-pronged strategies of this kind can be effective even in conflict situations or in opposition to long-standing violations such as female genital mutilation. They require bold and committed leadership and may not be popular initially.

This is also an area in which government partnerships with the private sector –

drawing on private sector resources while ensuring that it adopts responsible practices – can reap dividends, as seen in the cases of trafficking and harmful child labour. Civil society organizations have a key role to play as independent monitors, in changing ideas about what is considered acceptable behaviour and in raising awareness of children’s rights.

Initiatives in the 1990s to address exploitation and violence have shown again how children’s rights and progress are directly related. There are strong linkages, for example, between education systems and the reduction of child labour; birth registration and the access of minority children to basic services; and humanitarian relief and child protection in conflict situations.

Seeing children differently and acting accordingly

The World Summit for Children recognized the need for millions of children living in especially difficult circumstances to receive special attention, protection and assistance. Repeated experience in the 1990s has underscored the need to reverse the too common assumption that such children are somehow to blame for their predicament. From the failures of earlier projects that targeted children as ‘problem individuals’, it is clear that the roots of problems affecting children are usually found in the wider social setting. Policies need to focus not only on the immediate factors affecting children but also on the broader reasons for their exclusion. Putting children into institutions, for example, has often been an immediate response to problems but has rarely been a solution. The wider factors at work may include the failure to address prejudices about disability or ethnicity that lead to discrimination, or the need to protect children, including girls and adolescents, from such risks as drug trafficking and gender-based violence.

The prevailing view of adolescents is changing, from seeing them as the cause of problems such as violence and drug abuse to viewing them as important actors in solving their own and society’s problems. The decade has also seen efforts, if tentative at times, towards reforming welfare and criminal-justice systems to focus more on protecting than on prosecuting adolescents and on providing community and recreational alternatives to custody and punishment. These approaches are more consistent with child rights and often more effective as well. This is another area in which bold political leadership and positive shifts in public opinion need to reinforce one another.

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Investing in children’s progress: An imperative

The case for investing in children has been strengthened immeasurably by the experience of the 1990s. Well-integrated programmes for children in early childhood, and in support of families, especially those in high-risk situations, are now widely understood to have lasting benefits not just for children but also for overall

economic development. Public spending on basic education and other social services, particularly for girls and women, lays the foundation for better use of family-planning services, raising the age of marriage, delaying first pregnancy and improving child care and nutrition. The pay-offs for national development are enormous. Evidence from the 1990s proves that the education and healthy growth of children are crucial both for future economic progress and to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Despite this compelling evidence, in the 1990s governments of both industrialized and developing countries did not provide the resources required to radically improve

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the situation of women and children. In 1995, the World Summit for Social Development backed many of the goals of the World Summit for Children and endorsed the 20/20 Initiative – that 20 per cent of a developing country's budget, plus 20 per cent of overseas aid, efficiently spent on basic social services, would be sufficient to guarantee everyone access to those services. But studies of some 30 developing countries indicate that during

the 1990s basic social services received an average of 12 to 14 per cent of the national budget and 11 per cent of aid. In fact, some countries drastically reduced their investment in basic services.

What is more, despite unprecedented budget surpluses and economic growth, the proportion of industrialized countries' GNP devoted to aid actually declined markedly during the 1990s, hitting an all-time low in 2000 of 0.22 per cent. The long-standing minimum recommended by the UN of 0.7 per cent of GNP appears to be an even more distant target at the end of the decade than it did at the beginning.

Clearly, the world's children have not had the promised 'first call' on resources – despite the extraordinary growth of the global economy. Consequently, much more needs to be done now, and with the greatest urgency. National leaders must act on the past decade's most important lesson: that investing in children from the earliest years is neither a charitable gesture nor an extravagance but is rather the best way to ensure long-term development.

Special efforts for the most disadvantaged

Another clear lesson of the 1990s is that special interventions and targets are needed to reach those children and families who are most disadvantaged – who are mired in poverty, face special risks and are unable to benefit from economic growth and general social provisions. In country after country, it has been found that such interventions can have a lasting impact only if they are based on a true understanding of why such risks and exclusion occur. Action should be guided not only by how many children are attending school, but also by why some children, often girls or those from minority groups, are still not attending or succeeding. Why do many adolescents manage to avoid HIV infection, while others, predominantly girls, become infected? Asking such questions may involve facing up to painful realities – such as

deep-rooted social attitudes and practices that underlie discrimination and cause children to be harmed. But such questions need to be asked if disadvantaged children and families are not to be left behind.

A good understanding of the causes of poverty and exclusion is the first step towards overcoming these obstacles to children's progress. And this is best gained directly from those who experience exclusion in their daily lives, including children. Poverty and exclusion have many faces and causes, and these have often been underestimated in macroeconomic policies and development strategies that have relied on quick, easy and office-based solutions.

Children and families as participants in development

We know more clearly now than ever before that if development is to be sustained and poverty to be reduced, it will require the strong and active participation of children, women and men in the decisions that affect them. People must be empowered to be key actors in their own development. This applies equally to children, whose participation and self-expression – based on their evolving capacities and with respect for parental guidance – should be valued by adults.

Placing resources, information and decision-making power as close to families as possible is critical. Experience in many community-led schemes has shown that women who are fully involved in decision-making become effective agents for social change. Enabling such participation requires a change not so much in development theory and policy – which have long emphasized participatory approaches – but in the skills, attitudes and daily decisions of professional workers, from the nurse and head teacher to the minister of state. Practices that foster participation are most likely to be successful when backed by adequate levels of pay, accountability systems and clear commitment from political leaders.

Interventions in the 1990s began to take advantage of the new resource opportunities that are rapidly emerging through partnerships and the falling cost of new technology in information, communication and medical science. Both the established mass media and newer options in information networking have placed more power at the community level. When new technology and public-private partnerships have combined with community participation, the results have sometimes been remarkable – as with the recent initiatives on malaria, polio and interactive classroom education.

It is increasingly evident, however, that intractable problems – such as maternal mortality, protein-energy malnutrition, poor hygiene and sanitation, HIV/AIDS and endemic violence – cannot be resolved through

single sector or 'vertical' approaches alone. These problems are not new, but they are more wide-

spread and entrenched than they were a decade ago. We need responses that both empower the people most affected and address the underlying reasons for slow progress. Where access to sanitation has improved, for example, it has involved

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more than simply improving technology: Where people have understood the relationship between clean water, sanitation and health, they have made sanitation a priority in their communities. And this has been possible only when those who fetch the water and use the facilities have become partners in planning and management.

As suggested by these examples, the role of parents and the wider family in the care and nurturing of children, particularly in the early years, is of critical importance. However, this has often been overlooked, perhaps because these essential front-line contributions to the survival, health, nutrition, cognitive and psychosocial development of children – and to the learning of positive values – are less readily visible than, for instance, the role of infrastructure. Approaches in primary health care are once again emphasizing the importance of partnerships between families and health workers – and concentrating public resources on the local facilities that serve the majority of families.

The merits of a goal-focused approach

The World Summit for Children's strategy of setting specific goals and targets for children's rights and development has proven to be highly effective. Time-bound, well-specified goals and intermediate targets have not only demonstrated great power to motivate but have also provided a basis for regular monitoring and reporting on progress. The challenge is to pursue clear and widely agreed goals in ways that help advance the rights of children while encouraging community participation and local monitoring. Such approaches are more likely to lead to sustainable achievements by building awareness among families, capacity in communities and accountability between citizens and government.

It is true that the ambitious goals and targets agreed to at the World Summit for Children did not always compel leaders to provide the resources required to

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fully realize them. But goals and plans relating to children and women must continue to be ambitious if human progress is to be accelerated and scourges like HIV/AIDS and malnutrition are to be banished. To mobilize the necessary resources and to

ensure that child-related targets are not consigned to the periphery, these goals should be closely linked with initiatives for human development, poverty reduction, debt relief, decentralization and sector-based reform. These wider initiatives can advance an agenda for children by including child-specific targets and indicators, as well as regular progress reviews that are open to the public.

Public action, partnerships and participation

At the broadest level, then, the countries that achieved significant progress in human development in recent decades recognized the essential role of sustained economic growth but did not wait for such growth to occur. They made social investments a priority and spent proportionally more on basic social services, viewing these investments

as a foundation for development. They spent relatively efficiently and protected these allocations in times of economic decline. They also recognized that special attention must be paid to those who are excluded and most vulnerable – and that interventions supporting the advancement of women are critical to human development.

They also involved the whole of society in their project. People recognized that progress was possible and mobilized to bring it about. Often, they adopted the cause of children’s rights in their advocacy for reform. Human development, moreover, did not remain the brief of a government department or the passion of an ardent advocate. Rather, it involved everyone: lawyers and journalists, entrepreneurs and community activists, the elderly and the young. The most inclusive of partnerships dedicated to achieving a common goal – this is the best way, the experience of the 1990s tells us, to reduce the gap between promises and action and to secure rapid progress for children.

Building a world fit for children

A world fit for children is a just and peaceful world. It is one in which all children are given the love, care and nurturing they need to make a good start in life, where they can complete a basic education of good quality and, in adolescence, can develop their potential in a safe and supportive environment that will help them become caring and contributing citizens. This is the kind of world children deserve – and one that we as adults have an irrefutable obligation to create.

Families and caregivers are the vanguard of a child-friendly world, and that is why the poverty in which many millions of parents struggle to raise and protect their children must end. We must form and strengthen partnerships as platforms of action for children – and children and young people should be enlisted as interested parties, actors and advisers. Policies, legislation and budgets must be scrutinized to ensure that they are child-friendly and that they address poverty, counter discrimination and reduce inequalities. Private sector contributions, based on principles of social responsibility, should continue to be expanded in support of public action for children. Globalization and its associated technological breakthroughs should be harnessed to work for the benefit of children everywhere.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a set of standards to guide all policies and actions in addressing the best interests of children. The United Nations Millennium Summit Goals and the International Development Targets have set specific and time-bound objectives that must be reached throughout the world if the needs and rights of all children, including the most vulnerable, are to be met.

We should not be satisfied with anything less than the full realization of these international goals and targets. But within their framework, four key areas need to be focused on in this new decade: promoting healthy lives; providing high-quality education; protecting children from abuse, exploitation and violence; and combating HIV/AIDS and the risks the pandemic poses to children, their well-being and their rights. These are the most urgent and strategically important priorities in addressing the needs of children.

To support action in these four key areas, resources of all kinds and at all levels must be mobilized and shifted from damaging or less productive pursuits, such as

armed conflict and wasteful consumption. Within each of these areas, special efforts must be made to reach and include those children who are impoverished, marginalized and vulnerable. Violence against children and harmful acts and discrimination

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against girls and women must be specifically addressed. We must put an end to the culture of impunity.

National leaders, local governments and international agencies should set their own detailed targets, drawing on and adapting those that

will be reached at the Special Session on Children. They should establish priorities for accelerated action and conduct regular progress reviews – and should be held accountable for them by the whole of society, including children themselves.

Even in the poorest societies, progress for children can be made and sustained, but it requires a serious commitment by political leaders and policy makers, programme designers and service providers that their actions will be guided by the best interests of children. Dramatic progress is possible within one generation if we summon the political will to redirect resources towards addressing the basic needs of children.

It is now clear to the international community that any successful poverty-reduction strategy must begin with the rights and well-being of children. A society whose children are malnourished, abused, undereducated or exploited cannot truly claim to be progressing or to be developed, however impressive its economic growth or per-capita income levels might be.

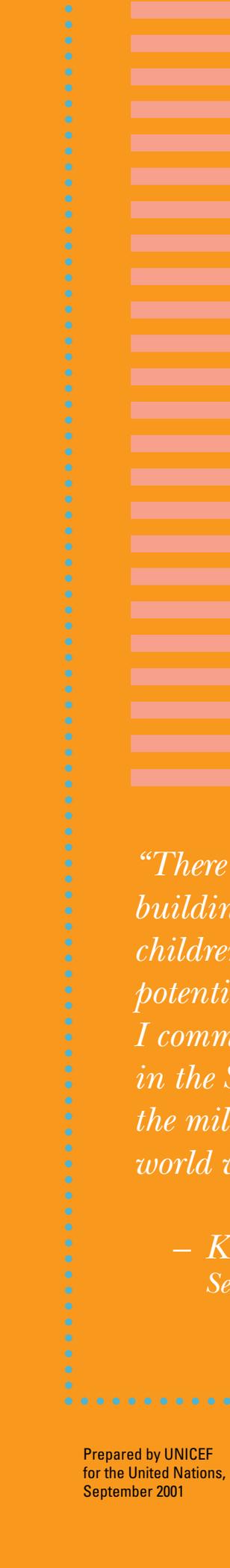
It is children whose individual development and social contribution shape the world's future – and it is through children that entrenched cycles of poverty, exclusion, intolerance and discrimination can be ended. This is the vision that inspired the World Summit for Children – and generated a global principle of a 'first call for children' as a guide to public policy, allocation of resources and practical activity.

Here at the start of the 21st century we know that we can build a world fit for children. We possess the understanding, the experience, the normative framework, the communications capacity and the technical know-how. And in this \$30 trillion global economy no one can say that we lack the resources. Thus, it is no longer a question of what is possible, but of what is given priority. Those who have the responsibility and resources to act may find other issues vying for their attention – but there is no issue more vital to humanity and its future than the survival and full development of our children.

Say Yes...

10 Ways to Change the World with Children

- Leave No Child Out
- Put Children First
- Care For Every Child
- Fight HIV/AIDS
- Stop Harming and Exploiting Children
- Listen to Children
- Educate Every Child
- Protect Children from War
- Protect the Earth for Children
- Fight Poverty: Invest in Children



“There is no task more important than building a world in which all of our children can grow up to realize their full potential, in health, peace and dignity. I commend this report to all the participants in the Special Session on Children, and to the millions of dedicated activists around the world who have united behind this cause.”

*– Kofi A. Annan
Secretary-General of the United Nations*