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for the
United Nations Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration
"UNICEF: Achievements and Challenges"

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UNICEF: Achievements and Challenges

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Overview

Created on 11 December 1946, at the very first session of the United Nations General Assembly, UNICEF remains -- almost half a century later -- the vital expression of the international community's love for all children and its commitment to assist those most in need. UNICEF's central achievement: helping remove the aura of inevitability that has surrounded the mass deaths and disabling of young children from time immemorial. It has helped governments and communities to save and improve the lives of hundreds of millions of children whose very survival, development and future are threatened by some of poverty's worst symptoms and causes: malnutrition, disease, ignorance, gender bias, and environmental degradation.

At the same time as it has focussed high-level political and widespread public attention on the plight of children, UNICEF has given impetus to consensus around a new model of development, one that places children -- and human beings -- at the heart of the development process. It has helped gain currency for the concept that meeting children's basic needs will help accelerate solutions to the main problems threatening humankind on the threshold of the 21st century -- poverty, overpopulation, and destruction of the environment.

Achievements

UNICEF's original mandate -- meeting the emergency needs of children in post-war Europe and China -- was broadened by the General Assembly in December 1950 to provide assistance to children in the developing countries. In October 1953, the General Assembly decided that the emergency fund for children should continue its work as a permanent arm of the United Nations system -- dropping the word "emergency" from its name but retaining the UNICEF acronym that had already become a household word in much of the world. Working closely with WHO and other international agencies, UNICEF developed a particular strength for the procurement of supplies and the implementation of action-oriented field activities. In the 1950s and 1960s, UNICEF supported action for children's health, nutrition, and education in a growing number of countries, and combatted such enemies of children as smallpox, yaws, and malaria.

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In 1979, the International Year of the Child (IYC), the scope of UNICEF's mission was again widened. As lead agency for IYC activities and beyond, it would not only provide much-needed supplies and technical expertise to governments, but also play the role of public advocate for protecting the rights and improving the lives of children in both the industrialized and the developing worlds. Programmes of cooperation with developing world governments would be combined with partnerships with NGOs, the private sector, grassroots communities, and diverse movements for social progress. Today, it has Country Programmes in some 130 nations -- and a working presence in over 160 countries. National Committees for UNICEF -- 35 at present -- act as non-governmental organizations raising funds and consciousness in the industrialized countries. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to UNICEF in 1965 was recognition that the well-being of today's children is inseparable from the peace and stability of tomorrow's world.

UNICEF is distinctive in that in pursuit of its mandate, it depends on voluntary financing. It receives both governmental and private sector support for its programmes of cooperation and advocacy campaigns.

UNICEF's major achievements include:

- * **Leadership in promoting the Child Survival and Development Revolution** -- since the early 1980s, using growth monitoring, oral rehydration therapy, breastfeeding and immunization as a core of low-cost life-savers, UNICEF has helped avert over 20 million child deaths, is now helping to save the lives of more than 4 million children annually, and has given many millions of children a better start in life.
- * **Adjustment (and Development) with a Human Face** -- UNICEF was among the first voices raised against the harsh negative effects of structural adjustment programmes on the poor, particularly children and women. It played a critical role in convincing the international financial institutions -- adjustment's principal advocates -- of the need to build into these programmes measures to safeguard the poor, especially in the fields of health and education. UNICEF also promotes "debt swaps for children" and is a strong advocate for reductions in military spending to benefit children and women. UNICEF prioritizes its assistance to impoverished and crisis-ridden Sub-Saharan Africa.
- * **Children as a zone of peace** -- from El Salvador to Lebanon, Sudan to former Yugoslavia, UNICEF pioneered the establishment of "Days of Tranquillity" and the opening of "Corridors of Peace" to provide vaccines and other assistance desperately needed by children caught in armed

conflict. For much of the 1980s, it was lead agency for assistance to war-ravaged Cambodia. Increasing attention is being paid to helping war-traumatized children. Currently, UNICEF devotes about a third of its budget to emergency assistance, much of it for man-made disasters such as wars.

* **Universal Child Immunization** -- the WHO/UNICEF goal of immunizing 80% of the world's children against six preventable diseases by the end of 1990 was achieved, saving more than 3 million lives a year. This continuing success has resulted from a massive social mobilization campaign that recruited government and religious leaders, the media, the military and millions of citizens. Polio and tetanus are now slated for eradication or virtual elimination by century's end.

* **Convention on the Rights of the Child** -- thanks in part to the demonstrable progress of the above programmes, momentum accelerated for a Convention on the Rights of the Child in the mid to late 1980s. The end of the Cold War and the expansion of democracy made it possible for the Convention to be adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 1989, entering into force as international law in 1990. It has rapidly become the law of the land in a record 155 countries by the end of January 1994.

* **World Summit for Children** -- the third great milestone of 1990 was the highly successful convening of the first truly global summit gathering ever -- the **World Summit for Children** -- committing over 150 leaders and governments to reaching over 20 specific, measurable goals to radically improve children's lives by the year 2000.

* **World Conference on Education for All** -- held in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990, the World Conference on Education for All put the international community on a course toward ensuring learning and life-skills for all children and literacy for all adults, with emphasis on girls and women.

* **National Programmes of Action (NPAs)** -- at a time when development planning seemed out of fashion, a new and effective instrument of strategic planning for children was born out of the World Summit for Children. By the end of 1993, over 90 countries (accounting for close to 90% of the world's children) had issued NPAs to implement the strategies and goals for children. Sub-national plans of action -- at the provincial and municipal levels -- are being issued in scores of countries, as part of decentralization and democratization trends. A set of mid-decade targets, to be reached by the end of 1995, have been adopted widely.

Challenges

The political will and practical momentum generated by the World Summit for Children were reinforced and expanded in 1992 by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, whose Agenda 21 embraced all the goals for children and women in a broader framework of action for sustainable development. The World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 highlighted the centrality of human rights to the development process, and called for all countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child by 1995, the first ever universal ratification of a human rights convention. The UN conferences on population and development in 1994, on women in 1995, and, in particular, the World Summit for Social Development in early 1995, are providing a common framework and giving a decisive push to global action on the social and economic fronts for the rest of the century and beyond.

Given the close inter-relation of all the issues these conferences will address, UNICEF believes that a major push to achieve the goals for children by the year 2000 will, in turn, jumpstart efforts to slow population growth, protect the environment, relieve poverty, improve human rights and the status of women -- at a relatively modest cost. A focus on children will also strengthen the family and community, and work against the forces of hatred and intolerance that are pulling apart the fabric of so many societies today. It will help prevent the North-South development gap from becoming a new global divide paralyzing cooperation and exacerbating tensions.

Year 2000 goals

UNICEF's strategic challenge at present is to help the world achieve the 7 overarching year 2000 goals approved at the World Summit for Children:

- Reduction of 1990 under-five mortality rates by one third or to a level of 70 per 1,000 live births, whichever is the greater reduction.
- Reduction of maternal mortality rates to half of 1990 levels.
- Reduction of severe and moderate malnutrition among under-five children by one half of 1990 levels.
- Universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary means of excreta disposal.
- Universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school age children.

■ Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to at least half of its 1990 level, with emphasis on female literacy.

■ Protection of children in especially difficult circumstances, particularly in situations of armed conflicts.

UNICEF estimates that, in order to achieve these major goals, the developing countries must allocate some 20% of their budgets for primary health care, nutrition, basic education, safe water and sanitation, and family planning, sectors on which they are currently spending only 10% on average. At the same time, the industrialized countries must allocate at least 20% of their foreign aid budgets to these priority areas of human development -- they devote only half as much to these areas today. Judging from the follow-up of developing and industrial countries to date, the greater challenge is likely to be getting the donor community to assume its responsibilities. The developing world is moving, and off to a good start.

Looking beyond the artificial dividing line of the year 2000, UNICEF seeks to contribute to a stronger United Nations in a global community made stronger and more liveable by nurtured generations that know, in turn, how to nurture their young. This may have been utopian thinking yesterday; today, it is a practical vision for common survival.