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PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST: A New Ethic for a New Millennium

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This article attempts to summarize UNICEF's experience and thinking about children in this current critical historical juncture.

First, no feature of contemporary global reality better illustrates the central human dilemma of our times than the deaths, year in and year out, of some 13 million children under the age of five. Each one of them has the same right to live, each has the same right to fulfill his or her potential, each has the same right to be loved and cared for, each has the same right to contribute to civilization, as the child of the wealthiest and most privileged of families.

For most of human history, such deaths were largely inevitable; but now that we know how to prevent or cure the diarrhoea, the pneumonia, and the measles that account for most of these deaths - not only in prosperous homes but also in the world's most remote, impoverished villages - what was once tragic but largely unavoidable has become morally unconscionable - an obscenity - today. Given this welcome change - our greatly enhanced capacity to prevent child death and disability - we must ask ourselves why do we continue to tolerate this massive, needless loss of life? Should not morality march with changing capacity?

This brings me to my second point. I am afraid that these deaths are tolerated because they are overwhelmingly the deaths of poor children, whose families and communities traditionally lack the clout to make the world stand up and take notice. The aura of inevitability that has surrounded poverty for so many centuries is perpetuated today by selfishness, indifference, and loss of hope. But there is now nothing inevitable or inescapable about continuation of the worst aspects of poverty on the threshold of the 21st century. Indeed, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee said half a century ago: "Our age is the first since the dawn of history that has dared dream it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to all."

Third, we now have the means to break the cycle that perpetuates poverty from one generation to the next - and break it at its weakest point. Through immunization and oral rehydration therapy, breastfeeding and growth monitoring, micronutrient supplementation and antibiotics for pneumonia, among

other simple and relatively inexpensive interventions, a "shield of protection" can be erected around the first fragile months and years of even the poorest of children. We can give them something close to the healthy start in life historically reserved for only the children of the well-to-do. A start, a good start, has been made. But will we accelerate the momentum in the last years of this century?

Fourth, we have a respectable momentum of progress to build on; we are certainly not starting from scratch. The last case of smallpox was reported in 1977 and other scourges such as polio and tetanus are now slated for eradication by the decade's end. Under-five mortality rates have been cut in half in the last 30 years. Today the world average stands at 97 deaths per 1000 live births - 100 per 1000 for the developing countries. In 1990, the world achieved the goal of 80 percent immunization against the major killer and crippling infections of childhood - up from around 10 percent coverage a decade before, when they were taking the lives of more than 4 million children annually. This largest peacetime collaboration in history has mobilized the social fabric of nations, demonstrating what can be accomplished when national leadership and community participation join in a common effort.

Fifth, the post-Cold War situation greatly favors our efforts. A significant portion of the vast energies and resources that kept a divided and fearful world on a war-footing for almost half a century can and must be re-directed now to alleviate the poverty that threatens to divide the world - and our nations - anew. It was, I believe, a recognition of these opportunities and dangers that led to the holding of the World Summit for Children and the entry into force of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1990. National Programmes of Action (NPAs) to implement the World Summit goals have been completed or drafted in over 100 countries accounting for more than 90 percent of the world's children. Many countries have gone on to translate their NPAs into provincial and municipal action plans - focussing the power of decentralization and democratization on the challenge of meeting human needs.

Sixth, we have - as a result of the Convention, the World Summit for Children, the Earth Summit, other critical international gatherings and the success of the Universal Child Immunization effort - broad global consensus on both the need and our capacity to accelerate human-centered, participatory, goal-driven, sustainable development and poverty-alleviation. We have greater agreement than ever on the need to respect each individual's political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights, and on the need to eradicate what we in UNICEF have called the "apartheid of gender." For the first time in world history we can say that humankind has begun to work with a common framework, pursuing common goals for its children. The goals to be achieved between 1990 and the year 2000 include:

- a 30 percent reduction in infant and young child mortality;
- a 50 percent reduction in maternal deaths;
- a halving of moderate and severe malnutrition among young children;
- universal access to basic education and achievement of primary school education by at least 80 percent of school-age children;
- universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary facilities;
- improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances, such as children in armed conflict, orphans, street children, refugees, victims of natural or man-made disasters, child labour, child prostitution and sexual abuse, disabled children, and children in the legal system.

Seventh, this action agenda for the remainder of the 1990s is entirely affordable. We are not talking about impossible sums. The U.S. \$25 billion extra per year that is needed to radically improve the lives of the world's children is about what Western Europe spends on alcohol every three months. Today the developing countries spend only 10 percent of their budgets on primary health care, nutrition, basic education, clean water and sanitation, and the rich countries assign the same low priority to these key areas of human development by devoting only 10 percent of their budgets to them. These percentages need to be doubled, at the very least!

Eighth, if this historic undertaking is to be successful, it will require more than funds, more than the marvelous scientific and technological tools we now have at our disposal. It will take people. Living, breathing, energetic, motivated and caring people and nations joined together for the common good. Whether we are talking about eradicating poverty's worst symptoms in the lives of children or overcoming the increasing problems facing children and youth in the richer nations, what is ultimately needed is a further substantial change in values, the embrace of an ethic of caring, an appreciation of the sacredness of life, respect for others as equals, tolerance of diversity, and above all, global solidarity. This process of change is well underway already, but needs to be greatly accelerated. Unless we can bring to bear the insights of psychology and the great spiritual traditions on the obstacles preventing the full flowering of these values, there is little hope for sustainable success.