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Address by Dr. Guido Bertolaso
Deputy Executive Director (External Relations)
of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Third International Colloquium of Mayors, Defenders of Children

Paris, France
9 December 1994



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Deputy Executive Director (External Relations)
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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you UNICEF's thoughts at the close of this important gathering. Over the past two days, mayors from around the world -- from industrialized and developing nations alike; from cities large and small -- have thoughtfully explored ways of improving children's lives in the midst of complex and fast-changing urban, national and global realities.

We have shared rich experiences, learned from one another, and committed ourselves to redouble our efforts for children and youth, and in particular, children and youth of poor communities. On behalf of UNICEF, I want to thank all of you for making this meeting a success and for taking the Mayors, Defenders of Children initiative a big step toward becoming a sustainable and dynamic movement.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to Mayor Jacques Chirac and his able staff, who opened the doors and hearts of this great city for us. Mr. Francois Remy and his colleagues at the French National Committee for UNICEF -- stalwarts all in the cause of children worldwide -- have provided inestimable assistance in organizing this meeting. Many others too numerous to name also deserve our thanks.

As a result of this gathering and the ones leading up to it, we at UNICEF have gained a better understanding of the difficulties mayors face in trying to improve conditions for children. One problem you confront is that decentralization -- a very welcome development -- so often means added responsibilities for municipal governments without the additional human and financial resources you need to get the job done.

Let me assure you that UNICEF supports your efforts to obtain the resources you need to fulfill your expanded mandates.

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In our work with national leaders and central government ministries, we will strongly emphasize that decentralization must not mean that central governments wash their hands of responsibility for the poor, leaving it to local governments to apply band-aids as best they can.

Our series of mayors' meetings has highlighted the urgent need for flexible partnerships of national, state and local governments for improved service delivery -- intergovernmental, multi-sectoral efforts to pursue concrete human goals within specific timeframes, based on a commitment to prevention rather than remediation of problems, and with as much delegation of decision-making power to local-level providers and consumers as possible.

For our part, we will provide what modest assistance we can to municipalities in designing and implementing programmes of action for children in developing countries, and we will also urge the donor community to give higher priority to the municipal dimensions of sustainable human development. We will encourage NGOs and local communities to work in partnership with city governments to improve conditions for children.

But given the reality of shrinking budgets, mayors will increasingly be called upon to perform "miracles" with scarce resources. And experience has shown that the cost of providing basic health care, including family planning information and services; basic education; safe water and adequate sanitation goes way down when low-cost technologies and strategies are made available to people in need who are empowered to manage their own affairs. Democratic participation is a basic human right, and can be a very cost-effective and powerful vehicle for social progress.

But unleashing the energies of individuals and communities to improve their own lives does not absolve government of its responsibilities. I am convinced of the need for more efficient, less bureaucratic government; I believe the private sector should take charge of certain inefficient State enterprises and even services; I am a strong advocate of personal responsibility. But I am equally convinced that only government can counteract the inherent tendency of the marketplace to favour the already advantaged; only government can level the playing field so that all citizens have equal opportunities, especially with regard to education and employment; and I feel strongly that government's foremost duty is to protect the vulnerable and empower the poor. And above all I believe that government must ensure that society invests -- abundantly and wisely -- in its children, who are the future.

There is something selfish, something excluding, something cruel in the temper of our times that deeply concerns me. It has

led to an unraveling or weakening of the social fabric, of nations, communities and families, in many countries. One does not have to point to the Bosnias or the Rwandas to see this dangerous trend at work; we see it, too, in the everyday functioning of many societies: a growing indifference to the plight of the poor... a hostility to immigrants, and even a denial of health care and education to their children... a rise in violence against women and children... the impulse to institutionalize children of single mothers... the resurgence of pseudo-scientific theories that blame the poor and racial minorities for their poverty... a sharp downturn in foreign aid... to mention just a few examples.

All of you see this in your cities, alongside the everyday generosity, solidarity, tolerance and inclusiveness that -- thank God! -- still abound in most societies. What is particularly worrisome about this mean-spiritedness is that it is not only coming from the disaffected but that it is moving into the mainstream, and is increasingly evident in the tone and policies of so many in positions of leadership. And what is so perverse about it is that it is gaining ground precisely when, for the first time in history, we have the means to satisfy the basic needs of each and every human being.

Mayors can be an effective voice counteracting this negative feature of contemporary life, and I can think of no better place to start than children -- providing all of them with the nurturing and protection, and the kind of values and education they need to build a better world.

These two days of deliberations have highlighted the need to view our work for children in a human rights framework. The Convention on the Rights of the Child does something quite extraordinary that, if implemented faithfully everywhere, would not only change the way children are treated but also transform human society as a whole: it turns children's essential needs into rights.

UNICEF has traditionally emphasized child survival and development, but with the impetus provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child we have increasingly taken up the banner of child protection. The protection provisions of the Convention address the obligations of governments to prevent all forms of exploitation and violence against children. While reiterating the importance of achieving the goals for child survival and development, permit me to focus now on a few protection issues that are of universal concern, but which tend to impact most severely in urban environments.

* First, child labour. As you know, some 200 million children are in the work force, a growing number of them in cities. UNICEF believes that it is imperative to do away

with the most hazardous and exploitative forms of child labor, particularly bonded labor, while striving to improve the conditions of working children, including those working in "hidden" occupations such as domestic servants.

* Second, the sexual exploitation of children, including the issue of so-called "sex tourism", has also been identified as a priority area for UNICEF's programme for children in especially difficult circumstances. UNICEF is expanding its cooperation with government and NGO programmes combatting these sensitive and difficult problems. Municipal governments must do more to protect the young from these evils.

* Third, juvenile justice is another area of serious concern. In many countries laws, courts, jails and rehabilitation facilities are designed for adults, not for the young. All too often we learn of children and teenagers being tortured or beaten by police, or being detained without fair hearings, or incarcerated in inhumane conditions or adult prisons. Minors are subject to capital punishment in some countries. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of death squads engaged in so-called "social cleansing" aimed at the elimination of street children and other indigents. Using the Convention on the Rights of the Child as our ethical and legal guide, comprehensive juvenile justice reform must be promoted, including training of law enforcement officials.

* Fourth, child abuse. Child abuse, linked closely to domestic violence against women, remains a problem in virtually every society, presenting a terribly thorny problem because it so often takes place behind closed doors and is frequently kept secret even by its intimidated victims. And let me note in passing that France was among the first to protect children against adult cruelty and neglect; French legislation in 1889 limiting paternal power over children became a model for similar laws in several other European countries. In recent decades much experience has been gained in identifying, preventing, treating and punishing violent child abuse, but these experiences need to be more widely shared and applied. It is at the local level that additional support for families, for youth and children, for NGOs, communities and schools, needs to be mobilized to curb all forms of child abuse.

* Fifthly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits discrimination of any kind, based on the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's "race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" (Article 2). Undeniable advances

against some forms of discrimination have been matched or outpaced in recent years by frightening retrogressions in others -- from so-called ethnic cleansing and genocide to systematic gender bias and racism to discrimination against immigrants. Children often suffer the consequences of the prejudices and hatreds of the adult world. Unless they are raised to appreciate diversity and practice inclusion -- and if society does not stand firm against the forces of intolerance -- the 21st century may well replay the worst tragedies of the 20th. Next year has been designated the International Year of Tolerance and all of us must work closely with UNESCO to build the universal culture of tolerance and peace envisaged by the founders of the United Nations.

* Sixth and finally, something so basic that it may seem unnecessary to say: every child has the right to a name at birth. The State has an obligation to protect that right, seeing to it that all children are duly registered. Millions of children are not registered today and are simply "falling between the cracks", never receiving the health care, education and legal protections to which they are entitled. States Parties must guarantee this "bottom-line" right to an identity through making registration of each child easy, accessible, free of charge and compulsory. Again, it is at the municipal level that all of this has to happen.

These are the reflections I wanted to share with you in closing the Third International Colloquium of the Mayors, Defenders of Children movement. We have in our hands the know-how, the tools and the proven strategies we need for making more human progress, at lower cost, for more children, in a shorter time, than ever before in history. Together, we can break poverty's deadly grip on the lives of new generations, so that we may greet the new millennium with hope, strength and solidarity.

I thank you all for participating and urge you to remain part of the growing network of mayors implementing municipal programmes of action for children. UNICEF with its field offices in over 130 countries and our National Committees in 35 industrialized nations -- is at your service.