

Children join the fight for their rights around the world

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Fourteen-year-old Giselle Russell from Happy Valley Goose Bay, Nfld., believes children need to have a say in what happens to them.

"They need to get involved with their government's decision-making," she says, speaking to me from New York. She was there to attend a preparatory meeting for the U.N. Special Session on Children to be held in September.

Russell, along with 200 other young people from around the world, met with representatives from 181 countries to review what has been done to improve the lives of children everywhere.

"The politics here are very intense. It's exciting to be involved in what's going to happen in the country," Russell says.

Ten years ago this September, government ministers and people from non-governmental agencies (NGOs) from Pakistan, Canada, Sweden, Egypt, Mali and Mexico met in New York with UNICEF to talk about children's welfare.

The World Summit for Children was the first conference of its kind, and was a seminal moment in the history of chil-

dren's rights. The talks produced the first global document ever written on children, The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection, and Development of Children. It called for U.N. member countries to improve the quality of children's lives.

Seventy-one heads of state or government signed the declaration and set out to implement programs to improve the health, education and personal safety of the world's children.

Last week's meeting was a kind of review of successes and failures since the document's signing. And the report card was disappointing. Carol Bellamy, UNICEF's executive director says, "The world has fallen short of achieving most of the goals."

One of the women involved in the project ten years ago was Canadian Liberal Senator Landon Pearson, who in 1996 was appointed as an adviser on children's rights to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Pearson says one of the shortcomings of the original document was that it wasn't written by the delegates, but drafted by UNICEF.

"This new one will be the result of

negotiations between 188 members of the U.N., their delegates, children and NGOs, which is a more practical way to come to solutions," she says.

Minister for Women's Development

Attiya says that although the final document will include specific steps and programs to promote the rights of the child, developing countries often lack the funds to implement those programmes. She suggests "debt swapping." "Instead of collecting its debt, a country like Canada could forgive it if the money were spent on education and healthcare.

and Education Attiya Inayatullah, who was also part of the discussions 10 years ago, agrees. She says change requires stakeholder involvement.

"Sovereign governments must have

the political will to move resolutions into reality, but implementation in the social sector requires ownership. Ultimately, that ownership is vested with citizens not government," she says.

The new document to be tabled in September is called A World Fit For Children. It outlines key areas of concern for those in developed and developing countries such as child poverty, children in armed conflict, trafficking in children, child labour, and infectious diseases.

Indeed, much more needs to be done to improve children's lives, and one of the most important changes over the last decade was in social attitudes toward children. There has been a shift in focus from children's welfare to children's rights.

For Russell and the five other young people from Canada who will be present at the U.N. Special Session on Children in the fall, child participation at the global level is a crucial step toward understanding that children have the right to be heard.

Attiya says Pakistan has both raised awareness about children's rights and

improved basic living conditions.

"In ten years, with financial assistance provided by countries such as Canada, we have been able to reduce infant mortality as a result of immunization. We're hoping by 2002 to eradicate polio," she says. "Through educational programmes, domestic abuse is beginning to be seen as a public issue and not a private matter."

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"Instead of collecting its debt, a country like Canada could forgive it if the money were spent on education, healthcare, or assisting children who live in the 73 areas of armed conflict in the world," she says.

Clearly, resolutions and international consensus are necessary, but they can only do so much. The combined efforts of government and civilians are needed for children's lives to really change for the better.