

# Rights of the children

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The world presented a hostile face to many millions of children in 1993. While 13 million died in the clutches of poverty, malnutrition and disease, military commanders and warlords shocked the world community by targeting children and women. Girls were raped by soldiers, young boys were recruited into armies and snipers shot at children in the belief that the most atrocious violations of human rights would terrorize civilian populations into submission. This is an age in which the nature of armed conflicts almost guarantees that many more children than soldiers will die.

As ethnic violence and civil strife escalated in several regions, antagonists sowed anti-personnel mines by the thousands, without thought for the safety of future generations and the day when peace might return. Land-mines have been used for decades to slow the advance of armies, but years after leaders have negotiated their differences, these hidden horrors continue to explode under children's feet. Accidental detonation almost daily of mines and booby traps by refugee families returning to their fields in the western provinces of Cambodia mocked the United Nations supervised elections in that country in May.

It is a shameful irony that human imagination should find such brutal expression in a world with so much capacity to save and to enrich people's lives.

Early in the year, I called for a total ban on the production, stockpiling, sale, export and use of land-mines. The United Nations General Assembly approved four resolutions on land-mines at its 1993 regular session, one of which calls for an export moratorium. It is hoped that all countries will heed this call and take even stronger measures.

Concerned with the protection, as well as the survival and development of children, UNICEF took its defence of children's rights to the World Conference

on Human Rights in Vienna in June.

This first major international human rights meeting in 25 years was a milestone for children and women. It endorsed the UNICEF mid-decade goal of universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as its founding principle that economic, social and cultural rights are inseparable from civil and political rights. The Conference also embraced the rights of women and the struggle for gender equality which, for UNICEF, begins with the girl child.

The Convention is at the cutting edge of human rights and UNICEF efforts to guarantee child survival and development. Healthy, educated girls and boys, raised in tolerance and respect for the differences and rights of others, are critical to a more peaceful and productive world. Nine tenths of the world's children already live in countries that have ratified the Convention, which looks likely to become the first human rights legal code ever to be adopted by every member of our family of nations. By the end of the year, 154 countries had ratified the Convention, 92 of which had also included its provisions in their national plans of action (NPAs).

Since World War II, life expectancy in the developing world has increased by about a third, infant and child death rates have been halved, the proportion of children starting school has risen from 50 per cent to 75 per cent, and the number of rural families with access to safe drinking water has risen from just 10 per cent to almost 60 per cent.

In country after country, leaders are beginning to make good on their promises. The universal child immunization (UCI) programme, launched by UNICEF and the World Health Organisation (WHO), is vaccinating 80 per cent of the world's children against the six main child killer diseases and saving the lives of 10,000 children a day, more than 3 million a year.

Deaths from measles have been cut by more than half, from 2.5 million a year in 1980 to 1 million. Infant deaths from neonatal tetanus have also been halved and polio is close to being eradicated in several regions. In December, China immunized more than 100 million children against polio in just two days, and in Somalia, despite the highly volatile situation, 750,000 children were vaccinated against measles.

Oral rehydration therapy (ORT) is saving 1 million children a year from diarrhoeal dehydration. In Mexico, where President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has made child health one of the centerpiece of his administration, 600,000 mothers were trained in ORT use and 7 million packages of oral rehydration salts (ORS) were distributed during National Health Week. During the same period, Mexico's Ministry of Health combined measles vaccinations for 22 million children with a megadose of vitamin A and an antiparasitic drug.

Salt iodisation programmes against mental retardation are now operational in 24 countries including Bangladesh, China, India and Pakistan, which together have almost half the developing world's children.

The extraordinary reach of immunization programmes has energized vitamin A distribution. In Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Malawi and the Philippines, children over the age of six months are given vitamin A capsules in tandem with their shots.

Education is in a state of crisis in much of the developing world. Almost 130 million children were denied primary education in 1993 and two thirds were girls. More than 660 million women are illiterate.

A joint initiative between UNICEF, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to expand basic education opportu-

nities.

At least three of the largest developing countries — China, Indonesia and Mexico — are on the way to achieving primary education for at least 80 per cent of their children, and three others — Brazil, Egypt and India — are in a position to do the same with an accelerated effort.

Over the past year and a half, most developing countries have committed themselves to achieving a set of 10 goals for children by the end of 1995 to give a major boost to efforts to reach the year 2000 goals. Their achievement would save an additional 2 million young lives every year and virtually eliminate the major causes of child blindness and mental retardation.

Also reflecting growing national commitments to child-related goals was the decision of South Africa's President F.W. de Klerk and the President of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela, to sign the Declaration of the World Summit for Children shortly after they received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Most UNICEF activities for the year focused on the 'silent' emergencies that claim 35,000 child lives every day. No combination of war or natural disaster has ever produced this diabolically relentless statistic.

UNICEF mounted emergency relief efforts in 64 countries compared with 54 in 1992, 50 in 1991 and 26 in 1990.

UNICEF and its major relief partners, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP), are also finding that it has become much more difficult, albeit necessary, to uphold the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality when the United Nations is also politically and militarily involved in an emergency. We must ensure that children who are affected by sanctions remain in the forefront of our concerns.

Just as persistent as the world's loud emergencies is the

debt crisis which has hobbled the development of the very poorest nations. The total indebtedness of sub-Saharan Africa was projected to be 237 per cent of its export income for 1993.

We must continue to remind ourselves that these are not paper fantasies. They concern human rights, children's rights that all government have the obligation to uphold.

There were rude awakenings for some of the wealthier nations that had obviously lost sight of the bottom line — the quality of life for their children.

Why is it that a country like Sri Lanka, with annual per capita income of US\$500, has one of the world's highest rates of child survival and 91 per cent of its children completing four years of primary school?

And how has Zimbabwe, with an average GNP per capita of only US\$620, managed to ensure that 94 per cent of its children reach grade five, thus achieving the same rate as several industrialised countries?

The answers reside within the commitment of these nations to an ideal: A commitment to give the very best they can to their children; a commitment to extract the maximum social miles per gallon from their available resources.

The past year has added momentum towards reaching our 1995 and year 2000 goals, but the coming year will be a 'make-it-or-break-it' year, during which all developing countries, all donors, all non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international agencies must unite to ensure the achievement of our targets.

If we can demonstrate success by the time of the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995, we will have made a major contribution to sustainable human development at this most crucial juncture in history. — Excerpts from 'Introduction' by Executive Director James P. Grant to the UNICEF Annual Report, 1994.