

# A World Fit for Children

Presentation by Jo Becker, Kansas City, September 13, 2002

Before talking about the UN Special Session for Children, I'd like to set the context by talking about the state of children's rights and the reality that children experience around the world. The concept of children's rights really began to take hold in 1989, with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Before that, the world thought primarily about children in terms of their **needs** and as passive objects of **aid**, but the CRC brought a real shift in thinking towards children as holders of rights, including the right to actively participate in shaping their own lives.

The adoption of the convention also brought the beginning of a children's rights movement. If you compare it to the women's rights movement or the environmental or other movements, it is still very young. But the thirteen years since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been marked by some significant changes and progress.

Some of the Advances:

- 1) The adoption of the Convention itself – It is first convention to bring together civil and political rights – such as the rights to freedom from torture or discrimination – with economic, social and cultural rights such as the right to housing, food and health. It's still the most comprehensive expression of children's rights to be found.
- 2) How quickly the CRC took hold. Ratification happened very swiftly and the CRC is now the most universally-accepted human rights treaty in history. This means its principles are recognized and legally binding on nearly every country in the world. I'm sure you already know that the two exceptions are the US and Somalia;
- 3) Around the world, national coalitions have come together to promote and monitor the CRC and to hold their governments accountable for their policies and actions. Many of these coalitions submit shadow reports to the United Nations to report on how their governments are doing. Many were active in the preparation for the recent Special Session.
- 4) In 1990, the first World Summit on Children brought together leaders from around the world to agree on certain concrete goals for children – reducing infant and maternal mortality; reducing child malnutrition, ensuring universal access to basic education, and to safe drinking water, and improving protection for children in especially difficult circumstances. Based on the World Summit, 155 countries adopted national plans of action to implement these goals.
- 5) In recent years, the world has begun looking beyond traditional areas such as health, nutrition and education to other areas where children are at risk. New movements have built to address child labor, to end the use of child soldiers, and to recognize widespread sexual exploitation of children. These have resulted in new treaties — in 1999 a new ILO Convention on the Worst forms of Child labor, addressing slave-like practices, hazardous labor, and sexual exploitation. This has now been ratified by 129 governments, and has become the most rapidly ratified convention in ILO history. In 2000, two optional protocols were adopted by the UN General Assembly, to strengthen protections in the CRC – one prohibits the use of children under 18 as child soldiers, the other addresses the sale and sexual exploitation of children. Each has been ratified by more than 30 countries.

- 6) Legislative change at the national level: Countries have established special juvenile court systems, country have ended the use of capital punishment for children, and legislation has been adopted in some states banning the use of corporal punishment.

So this is all great progress, right? Well, these advances haven't meant much to millions of children around the world who are still suffering unspeakable human rights abuses. My organization, Human Rights Watch, monitors human rights in 70 countries around the world, including the rights of children. Let me tell you about a few of the children we've interviewed during our investigations:

**AUNG:** In March of this year, I was on the Thai-Burma border, researching the use of child soldiers in Burma. One of the boys I interviewed was Aung. When Aung was 11, he was traveling from his aunt's house back to his home when he was picked up by army recruiters, who threatened him with jail unless he agreed to join the army. When he said no, they detained him and locked him in stocks for several hours to let him "decide." Fearing jail, eventually he agreed to join. During training, he was frequently beaten, and trained with a gun as tall as he was. He was only 12 when he was sent into combat for the first time. He said he was scared, but was afraid he would be punished by his commander if he didn't shoot.

Aung is one of an estimated 70,000 child soldiers in Burma. He is one of approximately 300,000 children around the world that are currently fighting in armed conflict in about 30 countries.

**SANU:** The second child is a girl named Sanu, from Nepal. When Sanu was 15, she was working at a carpet factory in Nepal. An older girl suggested they go across the border to India where there was supposedly another carpet factory offering better wages. Sanu agreed, but after traveling for 3 days with the older girl, found herself in Bombay. Her companion took her to a building that she said was a factory, but turned out to be a brothel. Sanu was given a nightgown, and her clothes were taken away. When a man came into her room and ordered her to have sex, she refused. He beat and raped her. For the next week, she was subjected to repeated rapes and beatings. Finally she agreed to take customers. She was told she could leave the brothel only after she repaid the \$1600 that the brother owner claimed had been paid to her parents.

Sanu is one of an estimated 20,000 girls under age 18 that work in brothels in Bombay. Half of them are thought to be infected with HIV, and many are trafficked, like Sanu, from Nepal. Around the world, millions of girls are part of the sex industry.

**DAMARIS:** Damaris is from the United States. She's a farmworker in Arizona, working as a day laborer for commercial agriculture. She told us of waking up each day before dawn, and travelling two or three hours to get to the lettuce and broccoli fields to begin work at 7 in the morning. During peak season, she would work until 9 at night before making the long journey back home. She would get just a few hours of sleep before getting up to repeat it again. She often worked 80 or 90 hours a week. For months on end, she suffered daily nosebleeds; and several times nearly passed out. She worked in extreme heat and was exposed to pesticides. Sometimes she felt ill from heat, chemicals and overwork, but she was required to keep working. She did this for 5 years, beginning when she was only 13.

There may be 300,000 child farmworkers like Damaris in the United States. Around the world, there are 250 million children under the age of fifteen who are involved in child labor.

For Damaris, Sanu and Aung, the promises of the Convention, other treaties, and the 1990 World Summit ring quite hollow. Around the world, the situation for children is quite grim. UN statistics show:

- 10 million children a year dying from malnutrition and preventable diseases;
- 125 million children are not attending school;
- wars have cost the lives of more than 2 million children in 10 years, and driven 25 million from their homes.
- The AIDS pandemic has orphaned 10 million children under age 15
- 40 million children each year are not even registered at birth.
- Millions of children are victim to violence and abuse, often by the very people responsible for their care – their parents, teachers, and guardians.

The problem is that governments have been quick to make promises to children – for example the CRC and the 1990 World Summit – but they’ve failed to live up to their commitments. Some have actively committed abuses against children, such as Burma, recruiting children by the thousands for use as soldiers, and others have simply stood by and failed to act. For many countries, rich and poor alike, children are simply not a priority. Poorer countries invest only 12-14 percent of their national budgets in basic social services such as health care and education, while experts agree that the minimum should be 20%. In wealthier countries, development aid dwindled to new lows during the 1990s. Despite pledges to support universal access to education, only 2 percent of world foreign aid goes to provide schooling for children in poor countries.

The UN Special Session on Children was a chance to put children back on the agenda and to recommit both resources and political will to ensure their rights. It was a chance for governments to make good on the broken promises of the past.

The UN Special Session was intended as a follow-up to the World Summit of 1990. It was meant to evaluate the world’s progress in meeting the 1990 Summit’s goals, and to adopt a new plan of action for children for the next 10-15 years. It was originally set for New York City from September 19-21 of last year, but after the September 11 attacks, was postponed until May of this year.

Nearly 70 heads of state and foreign ministers from around the world gathered in New York for the Special Session, along with 100s of child delegates, and 1000s of non-governmental organizations. For two years leading up to the Session, governments had worked to negotiate a declaration and plan of action to be adopted at the Special Session. These are what’s referred to in your agenda as the outcome document, or “A World Fit for Children.” Three preparatory sessions included NGOs from around the world, who strategized, lobbied governments and crafted statements and position papers to try to ensure that the outcome document was strong, and reflected the full range of children’s rights.

Fairly early on, governments agreed on 4 key priorities for action: health, education, combating HIV/AIDS, and protecting children from abuse, exploitation and violence. Within each of these, governments agreed on 4 or 5 key goals, and a much larger number of strategies and actions.

Within health, goals include reducing child mortality and maternal mortality by a third, reducing child malnutrition by a third, and reducing the proportion of households without sanitation and safe drinking water.

In Education, goals include getting 90 percent of children into primary school, and reducing the number of children of primary school age that are out of school by 50 %. Also to eliminate gender disparities in education, so that girls have equal access to school.

Combatting HIV/AIDS: reduce HIV infections among 15-24 year olds by 25 % by 2010; and reduce the proportion of infants infected by 50%

Protecting from abuse, exploitation and violence: This area is less quantifiable, but governments agreed to eliminate the worst forms of child labor, protect children from sexual exploitation, and protect children from all forms of violence.

These all sound good in principle. If the goals and targets set out in the document were all met, then we truly would have a world fit for children.

But many NGOs that participated in the process have a number of concerns:

- 1) Many of these promises made in the document are commitments that have been made before. Many were the same as those set at the 1990 Summit, but the numbers and dates were just tweaked. What's to ensure that this time they'll be kept?
- 2) Few of the goals are really specific and measurable, with a clear timetable for their achievement.
- 3) No real commitment to the resources that will be necessary. Experts estimate that \$100-120 billion/year is needed to fulfill the goals. In the document, governments reiterated a commitment to devoting 0.7 % of GNP for overseas development. However, this goal was adopted decades ago, and only three or four countries have ever achieved it. This is a particular problem for the United States. Although polls show that Americans think our government is one of the most generous in the world when it comes to providing international aid, in reality, among developed countries, ours is one of the worst. We give only one-seventh of the international target.
- 4) Finally, and most fundamentally, many NGOs felt the Special Session was a real missed opportunity to build on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Looking at the last decade, one of the greatest achievements was nearly universal ratification of the CRC. But clearly it has yet to be fully implemented. As a legally binding treaty, we felt that the Special Session should focus on a strategy for implementing the convention, and ensuring that the rights it outlines for children are actually realized. Instead, because of pressure from the United States, the Convention was sidelined, and only mentioned 3-4 times in the entire document. This provokes enormous anger and frustration from both NGOs and other governments. In a situation where nearly every other government was party to the CRC, instead of acknowledging that reality, the US used its muscle to bully other countries. It also tried to eliminate references to the rights of children and spent a great deal of energy trying to fight references to providing sexual and reproductive health education for adolescents and reference to the death penalty.. At a moment when the US should have been demonstrating

international leadership for children, instead it was perceived as taking backward positions and putting the success of the session in jeopardy.

I've outlined some of the failures of the Special Session, but there were also successes:

- this was the first time that children had a real presence at the UN. They were there in large numbers, they addressed the General Assembly, and took the podium next to world leaders. They weren't afraid to make themselves heard, or to criticize presidents and prime ministers for their failures.
- Thousands of NGOs participated in the process. This was a real change from the 1990 summit, when few NGOs were there. It demonstrates the huge increase in activity among NGOs on behalf of child rights, and the potential for NGOs to hold governments accountable for their promises;
- The vulnerability of children to exploitation and violence was given new prominence. At the 1990 summit, most of the goals were around traditional areas of health, education and nutrition. But at the Special Session, key issues such as the use of child soldiers, child labor, trafficking and sexual exploitation and violence against children were front and center. In fact, governments adopted more strategies and actions related to these issues than any of the other areas identified as priorities. This was largely as a result of pressure from NGOs.
- Governments committed to developing national plans of action to implement the session's goals by the end of next year. Governments are also expected to include children and NGOs in the development of these plans. That gives civil society a real opportunity to get involved and help shape government priorities and policy.
- Finally, here in the US, we can't hold the government to the CRC, since it is not a party. However, with the Special Session outcome document, we do have a tool for pushing the US government for stronger actions on behalf of children.

Clearly, this presentation has been one of good news and bad news. On the one hand, enormous advances have been made in the last thirteen years – child rights are recognized as never before, we now have a strong set of international legal standards, a global network of NGOs is involved in promoting and protecting the rights of children, and as of May, we have an ambitious set of goals set by governments from around the world. But we also face enormous challenges: the scale of human rights abuses that continue against children around the world is inexcusable. Governments have failed to muster the resources and the political will to keep promises, and the US government is often an obstacle rather than a leader.

Part of the good news is that fulfilling children's rights doesn't just depend on diplomats in New York or politicians in Washington. It also depends on committed activists in places like Kansas City. I commend the organizers for putting together this conference and look forward to your input throughout the day.

Thank you.