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Brief Report 1/90

ALL THE WORLD LOVES A CHILD?

On present trends, more than one hundred million children - mostly in the Third World - will die in the decade ahead. Five common illnesses - dehydration, pneumonia, tetanus, measles and whooping cough - all of which can be inexpensively treated or prevented by vaccines, antibiotics or oral rehydration, account for over half of all child deaths in the world.

According to the 1989 UNICEF State of the World's Children Report, the governments of the Third World, as a whole, are devoting half of their expenditures to debt servicing and military spending. Meanwhile, nearly 8 000 children are dying every single day because they have not been immunized. Approximately 6 000 are dying every day from pneumonia.

Political Commitment

To address one of the most pressing social issues of the decade ahead, UNICEF has called for a World Summit for Children to be held in September 1990, at the UN Headquarters in New York. The proposed summit would also give impetus to the new Convention on the Rights of a Child.

Children's basic rights are beginning to find their way onto the agendas of the world's political leaders. A new ethic is emerging in which the health and wellbeing of the world's children is regarded as the most significant measure of its level of development.

Convention

One of the most explicit expressions of this new ethic is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has now been presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The Convention is the final outcome of a decade of protracted negotiations between governments, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations.

It is the first agreement among some twenty leading nations of the world on the legally defined rights of the child and covers three main areas:

- * First, the inherent right to life - the most basic of all human rights. The Convention recognizes the child's right to adequate food, water, health care and shelter.
- * Second, the right to develop one's potential - through education, freedom of information and expression, and freedom of conscience and religion.
- * Third, protection against violence, abuse and exploitation in all its many forms.

The Convention also covers the rights of mentally or physically disabled children, refugees and those who are parentless or separated from their parents.

Significance

While the moral argument for this new ethic is an obvious one, there is also a practical argument. The practical consequences of death and suffering of the children of the world, are long-term:

- * Malnutrition means poor physical and mental growth, poor performance at school and at work, and the perpetuation of poverty.
- * High child death rates mean high birth rates and even more rapid population growth.
- * Lack of education precludes people from contributing fully to, or benefitting fully from, the development of their communities and nations.
- * Hopelessness and the denial of opportunity erode self-respect and sow the seeds of complex social problems for future generations.
- * Deprivation precludes environmental sensitivity, forcing millions to over-exploit their surroundings in the name of survival.

For these practical and long-term reasons UNICEF concludes that a major renewal of effort to protect the lives and the development of children would be 'the greatest long-term investment which the human race could make in its future economic prosperity, political stability, and environmental integrity'.