

25 YEARS

OF THE CONVENTION ON
THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Is the world a better
place for children?

unicef 

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FOREWORD

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, EQUITY AND OUR COMMON FUTURE

by **ANTHONY LAKE**

Throughout history, the advance of civilization has been closely tied to the idea that all people have rights: universal, inalienable entitlements to freedom, dignity and security, to be treated fairly and to live free from oppression. The health and soul of all societies depend on how these human rights are recognized – and acted upon.

But until the Convention on the Rights of the Child was conceived and adopted 25 years ago, the rights of the world's youngest citizens were not explicitly recognized by any international treaty, nor was there acknowledgement of the fundamental connection between the well-being of children and the strength of their societies. This is why the Convention was such an important milestone – and why the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary challenges us all to find new ways of pursuing its universal mandate for every child, as the global community charts its course for the post-Millennium Development Goals period.

The Convention articulated, for the first time, that children also possess innate rights, equal to those of adults: rights to health, to education, to protection and to equal opportunity – without regard to gender, economic status, ethnicity, religious belief, disability or geographical location. And, in conformance with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention unequivocally recognizes that these rights are “the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

But a recognized right is not necessarily an executed right. Children's rights are brought to life not through pronouncements, but through sustained political commitment. A society's strength is secured not through good intentions, but through strategic investments. And social change is achieved not only through powerful words, but also through the action such words can

In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, tens of thousands of children, some as young as 6 years old, have traditionally worked in sugar cane harvest and mining. Initiatives that provide stable schools and basic infrastructure have significantly reduced the number of the children subjected to child labour.



inspire. For without action – and the results only action can achieve – the best aspirations codified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child remain only words on paper.

As the essays in this compendium make clear, during the 25 years since the Convention was adopted, the world *has* taken action. In every region – and virtually every nation on earth – the Convention has inspired changes in laws to protect children and policies to help them reach their full potential. More broadly, it has provided a clear mandate to translate the right of every child to health, protection and hope into practical programmes and services.

This mandate has produced significant results, helping save and transform the lives of millions of children around the world. More children than ever before are surviving past their fifth birthdays. More are receiving vaccinations against diseases such as polio, which is nearly eradicated. More are benefiting from improved access to education, sanitation, water and nutrition. More youth are participating in matters affecting their own lives and taking a role in shaping their own futures.

These gains are impressive and important – and prove that common goals and shared effort can drive real change for children on the global, national and local levels.

But the very national statistical averages we use to prove our progress far too often mask the plight of far too many children. When we disaggregate these broad averages, disparities and even widening gaps emerge, revealing all the children who are not benefiting. Children who are being left behind because they live in hard-to-reach areas – in isolated rural communities or urban slums,

or in communities torn by conflict or catastrophes. Children who are victims of systemic prejudice and discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, disability, religion or skin colour. Children who want for nearly everything.

We cannot claim that children's rights are being upheld when 17,000 children under the age of 5 die every day, largely from causes we know how to prevent. When a girl in Afghanistan is kept home from school to perform household chores while her brothers gain an education. When a mother in Pakistan cannot access a simple polio vaccination for her child because they live in a remote community. When about one in four American children lives in poverty. When children are torn from their families, recruited into armed groups, and made to fight and die for causes they can barely understand.

These deprivations and adversities are violations of children's rights and cruel betrayals of children's hopes and dreams for a better life. This betrayal often begins at the beginning, in the earliest years, when critical neural connections are being formed in the developing brains of the youngest children. Research shows that these connections are deeply affected by deprivation, poor nutrition, trauma and toxic stress, further undermining the ability of children to reach their full potential. This loss is felt most by individual children and their families, but the long-term impact on their societies is tremendous.

We see the magnitude of this threat most starkly in countries riven by conflict: in the Syrian Arab Republic, where children have endured years of violence, deprivation and displacement; in the Central African Republic, where children have both witnessed and experienced cruelty and inter-communal violence on a massive scale; in South Sudan, where civil war is causing a nutrition and protection crisis that has left tens of thousands of children dead and has undermined the health, well-being and futures of many more. We see it in Iraq and in Gaza, where the recurrence of violent conflicts and indiscriminate attacks are endangering so many children and undermining the stability of their homelands.

These children are the future leaders of their societies, the future doctors and innovators, dreamers and doers. How will they view the world, and their responsibility to that world? If their own rights are violated, how will they learn respect for the rights of others, which is the foundation of civic duty and citizenship? How will they resist the lure of cynicism about the future, if their hopes for a better life have been destroyed?

These questions must be asked and answered as the world marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Convention and takes stock of progress in fulfilling its mandate. It is an especially pivotal time to do so, as the international development community – and the broader global community – considers the priorities of the 'post-2015' period following the conclusion of the Millennium Development Goals era.

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We have a responsibility now to find new ways of tackling the challenges we have not yet overcome, to reach the children we have not yet reached, and to put equity and children's rights at the centre of an agenda of action for *all* children – including those lagging in the march of progress.

This is not only a moral imperative. It is a practical opportunity to accelerate our progress in fulfilling the universal mandate of the Convention, which in turn advances all our development goals because it is cost-effective. Studies show that when we design policies and programmes not around the easiest to reach, but around the hardest to reach, we can achieve more results. There are additional costs in doing so, but our analyses show that these costs are well outweighed by the additional results.

Indeed, investing in the most disadvantaged children is a strategic imperative for all of us. A UNICEF study suggests that the regions that have narrowed gaps in equality across income levels have also made the fastest reductions in child mortality. And a 2013 *Lancet* study found that reductions in mortality in low- and middle-income countries account for about 11 per cent of recent economic growth in those countries.



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