

THE STATE OF  
THE WORLD'S  
CHILDREN  
2001

*This report has been prepared with the help of many people and organizations, including the following UNICEF field offices: Angola, Argentina, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, India, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Liberia, Malawi, Maldives, Mauritius, Mexico, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, the United Republic of Tanzania, Viet Nam, West Bank and Gaza, Zambia, Zimbabwe.*

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ISBN 92-806-3633-2

The Library of Congress has catalogued this serial publication as follows:

The state of the world's children 2001

UNICEF, UNICEF House, 3 UN Plaza,  
New York, NY 10017, USA.

E-mail: [pubdoc@unicef.org](mailto:pubdoc@unicef.org)

Web site: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

UNICEF, Palais des Nations,  
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

*Cover photo:*

Monica Newton/Peru

*Back cover photo:*

UNICEF/00-0739/Pirozzi

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Carol Bellamy, Executive Director,  
United Nations Children's Fund

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What happens during the very earliest years of a child's life, from birth to age 3, influences how the rest of childhood and adolescence unfolds. Yet, this critical time is usually neglected in the policies, programmes and budgets of countries. Drawing on reports from the world over, <i>The State of the World's Children 2001</i> details the daily lives of parents and other caregivers who are striving – in the face of war, poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemic – to protect the rights and meet the needs of these young children.	
<b>Choices to be made:</b> The opening section makes the case for investing in the earliest years of childhood, before the age of three, when brain development is most malleable and rights are most vulnerable. It sets out the options governments have about where and when to make investments to ensure that children under three have their rights protected and their needs met. And it introduces the importance of early childhood development programmes, not only for children, their parents and caregivers, but for the progress of nations as a whole.	8
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# Foreword

**T**he United Nations General Assembly's Special Session on Children in September 2001 will indeed be a special session in several ways. It will have the potential to shape the lives of children and adolescents throughout the world. It will assemble leaders from governments and non-governmental organizations, as well as children and adolescents, in a model of wide participation and partnership that must be the way of the future in the work of the UN. It will agree on a plan of action that must spur the international community to take the steps needed to realize the rights of every child.

Today, millions of children lead safer, healthier and fuller lives than they did a decade ago – before the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and the World Summit for Children in 1990. The same can be said of the progress of millions of women since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979. And yet too many children and women still live outside the protection of society. Too many still see their rights abused or threatened.

The Special Session will review progress in meeting the commitments made at the World Summit for Children and the obligations entered into with the Convention on the Rights of the Child – the most widely and rapidly ratified human rights treaty in history. It promises to be a sobering review. But even more, the Session will look to the future. It will set specific, time-bound targets for the achievement of our main objective over the next decade: protecting and fulfilling the rights of all children and women.

The Session's agenda has already inspired a remarkable debate around three desired outcomes: every child should have the best possible start in life; every child should receive a good-quality basic education; and every child should have the opportunities to develop his or her full potential and contribute to society in meaningful ways. *The State of the World's Children 2001* highlights the first of our goals – the best possible start in life for every child, without exception.

The preparations for the Special Session have been imbued with a sense of purpose that promises to carry through to the gathering itself. Nearly 1,000 participants from governments, the UN family and international and national civil society have been engaged. Children and adolescents have been among the clearest and most passionate voices.

At local, national and regional levels, these young people have added their perspectives to the assessments of how the world has lived up to its obligations to children. They have spoken about their own role as agents for change. Many of them will come to New York in September 2001 to take part in the Special Session itself. I hope they will be listened to carefully. I hope that for them, and for the rest of the world's children, we will make the Special Session of 2001 the best possible start to this new millennium.



Kofi A. Annan  
Secretary-General of the United Nations

# Early childhood



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*Minutes-old newborn in the United States.*



# Our promise to the

From Nelson Mandela

**M**y earliest childhood memories are of the village of Qunu in the rolling hills and green valleys of the Transkei territory in the south-eastern part of South Africa. Qunu was where I spent the happiest years of my boyhood, surrounded by a family so full of babies, children, aunts and uncles that I cannot remember a single waking moment when I was alone.

There was where my father taught me, by the way he led his life, the sense of justice that I have carried with me for the many decades I have lived. By watching him closely, I learned to stand tall and stand strong for my beliefs.

It was in Qunu that my mother gave me the stories that charged my imagination, teaching me kindness and generosity as she cooked meals over an open fire and kept me fed and healthy. From my days as a herd-boy I learned my love of the countryside, of open spaces and the sim-

back, I feel an immense sense of gratitude to my father and mother, and to all the people who raised me when I was just a boy and formed me into the man I am today.

That was what I learned as a child. Now that I am an old man, it is children who inspire me.

My dear young people: I see the light in your eyes, the energy of your bodies and the hope that is in your spirit. I know it is you, not I, who will make the future. It is you, not I, who will fix our wrongs and carry forward all that is right with the world.

If I could, in good faith, promise you the childhood I had, I would. If I could promise you that every one of your days will be a day of learning and growing, I would. If I could promise that nothing – not war, poverty, not injustice – will deny you your parents, your name, your right to live a good childhood and that such a childhood will lead you to a full and fruitful life, I would.

But I will only promise you what I know I can deliver. You have my word that I will continue to take all that I learned in my earliest days and all that I have learned since then, to protect your rights. I will work every day in every way I know to support you as you grow. I will seek out your voices and your opinions and I will have others hear them too.



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