

MEDIA RELEASE

The Convention on the Rights of the Child Comes of Age

UNICEF hails major achievements and points to challenges ahead

Geneva, 19 November 2007 – Children and young people around the world are joining UNICEF and its partners on 20 November to celebrate the 18th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The celebration highlights the important difference the CRC has made to the lives of millions of children and calls for a further commitment to create a world fit for all children.

“The lives of many of today’s children tell us a story of tremendous change brought about by the Convention,” said Philip O’Brien, UNICEF Regional Director for Europe during a round table discussion with children and young people at Geneva’s Palais des Nations. “During the last two decades, millions have gained access to education, and fewer are dying of preventable diseases. Let’s celebrate what has been achieved – and then renew our commitment to create a world, where all children have all their rights fulfilled.”

The CRC strengthened and galvanized an already existing drive for universal education. Special programmes for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable children, as well as the abolition of school fees and other measures have opened the school gates for millions of children who were previously excluded. The Convention also led to a new understanding of the importance of education in situations of conflict and natural disasters. Due to this, education programmes have become a standard element of emergency operations, with UNICEF as the leading UN agency.

Child mortality has been reduced considerably over the past two decades. In 1990, around 13 million children died before their fifth birthday. By 2006, this number had dropped to 9.7 million – still an unacceptable figure, particularly since many deaths could be prevented, but nevertheless an important achievement.

Under the CRC tenure, the world has also seen positive developments in child protection, among them the legal measure to protect children in conflict zones. Much more attention has been given to other issues such as commercial sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking or female genital mutilation/cutting with corresponding legislation to tackle them.

Around the world, UNICEF field offices and National Committees and other child rights advocates are celebrating the CRC’s anniversary through events and campaigns. Some are using the opportunity to convince their own governments to establish a Children’s Commissioner to monitor the implementation of the Convention, following the good example of other countries. Others are using the anniversary to further push for an integration of the principles of the Convention into national constitutions. Some TV broadcasters are dedicating programmes to children’s rights.

According to Marta Santos Pais, Director of UNICEF's Innocenti Research Center, these activities show that the Convention led to a real child rights movement that consists of tens of thousands of initiatives all over the world, involving millions of people.

"The CRC is not about promises, it's about obligations. Implementing the CRC is first and foremost a government's obligation. But parents, teachers, social activists and children themselves have an important role to play as well. If supported by each and every one of us, this movement will radically change the world for all new generations," Santos Pais said during the event at Geneva's Palais des Nations.

Yet despite the progress achieved, a lot needs to be done to ensure that all children can enjoy their rights:

About 27,000 children under the age of five are still dying every day, mainly from preventable causes; every 3.6 seconds one person dies of malnutrition – in most cases it is a child under the age of five; malaria kills a child somewhere in the world every 30 seconds; more than 15 million children have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS; more than two million children were living with HIV or AIDS in 2006, but only 15 percent of those who needed antiretroviral treatment, received it.

UNICEF is appealing to all governments to put children's rights high on the national agenda by further strengthening social systems and legal frameworks and by securing sufficient budgets for that. UNICEF is also appealing to societies at large to strive and further expand the child rights movement by continuously raising awareness about what still needs to be done. If strengthened and supported by all parts of society, this movement will radically change the world for all new generations to come.

"The CRC has ushered in a new social contract between governments, communities, schools, families and adults on the one side and children on the other," said Jean Zermatten, Vice Chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. "We need to remind ourselves how we, as adults, see children and how we act towards them. This is not easy and is certainly one of the Convention's biggest challenges. "

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