

The Third Arab High Level Conference on the Rights of the Child

Tunis, 12-14 January 2004

Concept Paper and Agenda

Growing Arab Concern about Childhood and Achievements Made

Arab countries paid special attention to childhood over the past two decades vis-à-vis the global care given in this regard. These states have made evident progress in children related indicators, including a reduction in under-5 mortality rate (U5MR) to less than 70 per 1000 live births in at least 15 countries and an expanded coverage of children's immunization. Most Arab countries are nearing realization of the goal for polio elimination; girls' enrolment in basic education stands at 80% in 15 countries and the ratio of the population with access to clean water and adequate sanitation has increased significantly.

Sixteen Arab countries have established a higher council or national task force for childhood and family. These bodies are designing and monitoring national plans and co-ordinating among the governmental and non-governmental agencies/systems that have specialties relevant to childhood. Certain Arab countries have established children-specific information centres; many of them have placed emphasis on developing their legislation concerning children - ensuring realisation of their full rights, while other Arab countries have enacted a law or code for children.

The League of Arab States (LAS) designed a ten-year Arab plan of action (First Arab High Level Conference on Children, Tunis, 1992) providing guidance to establishing national plans, including mid-decade goals, which were reviewed, evaluated and upgraded in the light of the end-of-decade goals. The Arab countries had submitted their preliminary and regular reports to the multinational Commission on the Rights of the Child, assisting in deepening dialogue and stimulating efforts for implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Existing Challenges

Despite this progress in performance, there remain many challenges including that certain countries could not achieve the goal for reducing U5MR by one third. This rate is still higher than 70 per 1000 live births in a number of other Arab countries. Other challenges are still facing a decisive elimination of polio. Malnutrition among children is increasing in a significant number of Arab states; the percentage of pregnant women suffering from anaemia is increasing

in many countries and iodised salt has not yet been used in all Arab countries. A modest proportion of Arab children have access to ECD programmes.

Children under occupation or siege and armed conflicts - the impacts of which are exacerbating due to prolonged duration and to targeting armless civilians, particularly children and their weak protection mechanisms – are suffering.

With approximately 11 million children not having access to their right to basic education and with more than 12 million working children, the human development indicator in most Arab countries is less than expected vis-à-vis the average per capita income. Intra- and inter-country disparities in the status of children in Arab countries are widening within most of Arab countries.

These problems worsen in the following contexts: an indebtedness crisis, escalating unemployment and inflation rates, increasing poverty with expanded prevalence and gap, declining capability of a state to meet an individual's basic needs, reduced governmental expenditure on social spheres, absence of a demographic dimension in development policies, ongoing deterioration of quality and level of basic health, educational and social services, the growing phenomenon of street children, drug addiction, violence manifestations against and by children and the risks of the augmenting role of globalised information in a manner that threatens the children's cultural identity.

The international and Arab effort has focused on the review of what achievements have been made against the commitments called for under the World Declaration of the (first) World Summit for Children-1990.

The review was also conducted in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by all Arab countries. Linked to this effort has been a continued dialogue on new global goals with participation by governments, civil society institutions, the youth and research centres in the context of The Second World Summit for Children in 2002.

Childhood on Arab Summits Agendas

The Arab concern about children/childhood crystallised at the advent of the new millennium when the Arab Summit approved of a contemporary document '*The Arab Framework for the Rights of the Child*' (Resolution No. 16, March 2001, Amman).

In implementation of the resolutions passed by the said Arab Summit, the second Arab High Level Conference on the Rights of the Child (AHLCRC) was held in July 2001. Issued during this event were the 'Cairo Declaration on a World Fit for Children' to activate the mechanisms for a joint Arab action for children, a statement on a unified Arab stance to actively participate in the Second World Summit for Children (New York, May 2002), and a decision to prepare a

proposed 'second' plan of action on children in light of the new global trends and dogmatic genuine Arab fundamentals.

Within this framework, the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States laid down the proposed 'second' plan of action to guide member states in setting or reviewing their national plans for the next ten years.

In so doing, LAS's General Secretariat drew on a number of fundamental references:

- Arab Charter on the Rights of the Child (1984);
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989);
- World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children (1990);
- First Plan of Action for Children (1992);
- Cairo Declaration on Mechanisms of Joint Arab Action, second AHLCC (2001); and
- New York outcome document '*A World Fit for Children*', (2002).

LAS's General Secretariat also relied on the outcomes of and recommendations by regional and Arab seminars, committees and conferences:

- Seminar on Children's Rights, San'a' (1998);
- Youth Conference, Amman (2000);
- Arab Regional Seminar on Children, Beirut (2001);
- Civil Society Conference on Children, Rabat (2001);
- Recommendations made by Arab Technical Consultative Committee, seventh, eighth and ninth sessions 2000, 2001 and 2002; and
- In its extra-ordinary session (Bahrain 28-30 September 2003), the Arab Technical Consultative Committee – serving as a preparatory committee for the AHLCRC - studied and revised the second 'proposed Arab Plan of Action on Children', and made their recommendation to approve of this proposal and submit it to the AHLCRC.

Premises Leading to this Conference

In implementation of Arab Summit Resolution No. 239 (Beirut, March 2002) and based on a kind invitation by the Government of Tunisia to host this Conference, co-operation and co-ordination have been made among LAS's General Secretariat, the Government of Tunisia and UNICEF's MENA Regional Office to prepare for this event.

Timing:

12-14 January 2004, concurrently with Tunisian celebration of the National Holiday for Children.

Venue

At distinguished hotels in Tunis the Capital.

Basic Document

'Second' proposed Arab Plan of Action for Children.

Why Tunisia?

- Tunisia is the capital city, which hosted the first AHLCC more than ten years ago (1992), where the 'first' Arab Plan of Action for Children was approved of for the then next ten years.
- Tunisia has pioneering experiences in the areas of children's rights.
- Tunisia requested to host the forthcoming AHLCC during the convention of the second AHLCC in Cairo, July 2002.

Why a High Level Conference?

- To ensure participation by senior Arab officials concerned about/working for children/childhood in the Arab World, along with participation by representatives of the civil society and the young people/adolescents to attain concerted efforts by the national governmental and non-governmental agencies and mechanisms, as well as with participation by the children themselves.
- Since this Conference comes after the second World Summit for Children (May 2002) reflecting a consensus among LAS's member states - a high level involvement will help these countries design their individual national plans, develop and upgrade their mechanisms and agencies/systems concerned with children and promote/enhance the human resources working for children to fulfil the rights of the Arab child, as well as to commit themselves to joint Arab efforts for the sake of providing protection to Palestinian children, of mitigating their suffering under the stresses of Zionist occupation and of promoting their health, educational and social status.

Expected to be issued by the Conference

- The 'second' Arab Plan of Action for Children to guide member states in establishing their individual national plans and programmes for the next ten years;
- A decision concerning the protection of children, women and families in Occupied Palestine Territories, in implementation of Resolution No. 238 (Arab Summit, Beirut 2002); and
- 'Tunis Declaration' to include that LAS member states are committed to design their individual national plans, develop and upgrade their mechanisms and agencies/systems concerned with children and promote/enhance the human resources working for children to fulfil the rights of the Arab child, as well as to commit themselves to joint Arab efforts for the sake of providing protection to Palestinian children, of mitigating their suffering under the stresses of Zionist occupation and of promoting their health, educational and social status.

Way ahead

Things hoped to be done after the forthcoming conference by national organs, joint Arab action institutions and concerned UN organizations.

Existing and foreseen challenges impose the initiation of a new phase of joint Arab action in favour of children at the Arab regional and national levels. The aim is to continue with the achievements that have already been made.

In fact, it is a new phase characterized by an honest determination and a political will to be reflected by contemporary documents that are supported by resolutions taken at the highest Arab political level – Arab summits and high level conferences.

The phase requires establishing ambitious national and pan-Arab strategies and plans, appropriate budgets, serious work and qualified human competencies.