

Child-centred Development: The basis for sustainable human development.

The development and progress of nations encompasses much more than economic growth. People are the most important resource of a country and the basis for its progress and development. Human well-being and dignity is both the central purpose of development as well as of the primary means towards development. Sustainable human development is therefore based on enhancing people's well-being and creating conditions of equality that enable all people to realize their full potential.¹

Child-centered approaches to development represent an opportunity to tackle seemingly intractable problems of poverty. Children are the starting point for breaking intergenerational cycles of denial and patterns of discrimination. Promoting development that is guided by the best interests of the child and oriented towards realizing the rights of children ensures sustainable human development. The well-being of children translates into the well being of a nation. It is a key yardstick for measuring national development.²

The Millennium Declaration was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2000.³ It was the outcome of the largest ever gathering of world leaders and represents the widespread endorsement of child-centered values and sustainable human development. Donors such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and many other agencies have realigned their international development goals to support this declaration.

As leaders we have a duty, therefore, to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.

-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (at the Millennium Summit)

Why a Child-Centered Approach?

Children are the building blocks of nations and all of humanity. The effects of poverty and lack of development are the most extreme on children, causing lifelong damage in their minds and bodies. It restricts their human capabilities as well as their life opportunities. Damage suffered due to malnutrition, ill health and inadequate care during childhood impedes future learning and physical development that often cannot be repaired later in life. Children living in poverty then pass that poverty along to their children and perpetuate the cycle.

The cycle of poverty has a negative impact on all stages of children's lives. Even before they are born, the impact of anaemia in pregnant women frequently results in low birth weight babies. Inadequate care and nutrition, combined with unsanitary environments result in disease patterns of diarrhoea, respiratory infections and other preventable illnesses that often kill children under-five years of age. For those who survive, these conditions undermine their physical, psychosocial and cognitive capacities.

Early childhood is a critical formative stage for children. Inadequacies of care, stimulation, adequate nutrition and a clean and healthy environment can result in limited cognitive development and compromised immunity. Denial or neglect during this stage can restrict a child's learning potential, as well as increase their vulnerability to disease and infection. In 1998, 40 percent of children under five years of age in developing countries suffered from stunting (low height for age) and a significant portion from wasting (low weight for age).⁴ This indicates that children are not being adequately nourished, stimulated or kept free from infection and disease.



These patterns of denial continue to middle childhood. This is the stage where access to quality basic services plays a crucial role in children's development. Basic education in particular underpins the development of human potential and life opportunities for children. Yet in 1999, at least a 130 million children of school going age in the developing world did not have access to education and a substantial portion of those who did go to school were captive to sub-standard situations where little learning actually takes place.⁵

In many countries, as a coping strategy to deal with poverty, children are frequently forced to work, taking care of their younger siblings, or labouring inside or outside the home, instead of attending school. In 1998, globally 250 million children were working.⁶ All too often, children, particularly girls, grow to adolescence bearing similar responsibilities to adults. Their lives have been characterized by denials of adequate nutrition, health care, a clean environment, emotional attention and education. This is also an important time of socialization where traditional gender roles and identities are reinforced. The subordinate status of women to men perpetuates cycles of denial. Indeed women's ill health and inadequate nutrition during pregnancy, and insufficient obstetric care frequently result in low birth weight babies that are particularly vulnerable to sub-optimal early childhood development.

All this implies that children bear a disproportionate burden of poverty and a denial of their rights. No other age group is more likely to live in poverty. A child born today in the developing world has a 4 out of 10 chance of living in extreme poverty.⁷



The worst manifestations of poverty and lack of development can be eradicated in less than a generation. Taking a child-centered approach is essential to breaking these cycles of denial that restrict children's capabilities and potential. It is the only way to address patterns of ill health, inadequate nutrition and the limitations of poor or no education. It is the foundation for all nation building.



Global Commitment to Children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989 and was ratified more quickly and by more countries than any previous human rights instruments.⁸ The ratification of CRC by all but two nations of the world represented a global recognition that children are not only entitled to human rights, but the pursuit and progressive realization of human rights should be guided by the best interests of the child.

The four foundation principles underpinning the CRC are:

- Universality/Non-discrimination (article 2) - All children have the same right to develop their potential regardless of their race, colour, gender language, opinion, origin disability or any other characteristic.
- The best interests of the Child (article 3) should be the primary consideration in all actions and decisions affecting children. It serves as a mediating principle in situations where there are conflicts of interests and rights to ensure that children's best interests prevail. This principle provides a basis for evaluating protection towards children. The best interests principle has been invoked to argue that basic services for children and women must be protected at all times, including during wars, periods of structural adjustment and other economic reforms.
- Right to Survival and Development (article 6) - Access to basic services and equity of opportunity to achieve their full development should be ensured to every child. This should be based on distributive justice and positive policies to guarantee opportunity and access to all.
- Views of the Child (article 12) should be given regard and respected. Children's opinions and participation in decision-making are central to the realization of their rights.⁹

The Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is an important human rights instrument because through it the well-being of children is linked to the biological and social status of women. Moreover, it is essential to breaking patterns of gender-based discrimination against girls. In pursuing CEDAW's goals, States are encouraged to introduce measures of affirmative action until equality between men and women is reached. CEDAW reinforces the best interests of the child.¹⁰

Countries that are going through different types of crisis and development transitions do well to use CRC and CEDAW as touchstones or points of reference for guiding policy development.¹¹ The CRC recognizes that the realization of children's rights is the responsibility of many different actors including Nation States and the international community.

The World Summit for Children

The World Summit for Children in 1990 took place against the backdrop of the end of the Cold War. Within this context, it became evident to the international community that addressing the systemic causes of poverty and lack of development requires a focus on the needs and rights of children. The World Summit adopted a set of time-bound goals to ensure the survival, protection and development of children. It reoriented international development perspectives and brought about a global recognition that the well-being of children requires political action at the highest level.¹² The principle of the first call for children emerged from the World Summit for Children. The first call for children asserts that the essential needs of all children be given the highest priority in the allocation of resources, in bad times as well as good, within families, within nations and in international cooperation. The first call for children is meant to serve as the guiding framework to policy, resource allocation and programmatic activity.

Following the World Summit, many nations aggressively pursued their commitments and the outcomes were impressive: Under five mortality rates were reduced by 14 percent. Neonatal tetanus was eliminated in 104 of 161 developing nations. Vitamin A and iodized salt were delivered to nearly 75 percent of children.¹³ In spite of these achievements, the promises made at the World Summit have gone largely unfulfilled. There have been many lost opportunities to put children at the centre of policy and ensure that development affirms children's



rights in a sustainable way. Over ten years after the World Summit for Children, it has also become clear that improving the situation of children requires greater realignment of priorities. Experiences and lessons demonstrate that there must be a progressive change in strategies to promote the goals of the World Summit.

The 20/20 initiative

The 20/20 initiative, agreed at the Copenhagen Social Summit in 1995, calls for 20 percent of the national budgets of developing countries and 20 percent of official development assistance to be allocated to basic social services, including basic education, primary health care, reproductive health, water and sanitation, and nutrition. The main purpose of the 20/20 initiative is to ensure that an integrated package of basic social services of good quality becomes accessible to all within the foreseeable future. The 20/20 initiative calls for a focus on basic social services because such investment has been proven to be more egalitarian in the distribution of benefits.¹⁴

In general the major beneficiaries of government spending on social services, as opposed to basic social services, are the non-poor. For example, an average 33 percent of public spending on education benefits the richest fifth of the population, while only 13 percent benefits the poorest fifth. In health respective shares are 30 percent and 12 percent.¹⁵

Through an investment of a very modest share of the world's annual income, all children could achieve a minimum standard of living. The extra resources will be complemented by reforms to make spending more equitable and efficient.¹⁶ The 20/20 initiative is a concrete expression of shared responsibility for social development at the global level. The investment needed is estimated at \$80 billion per year less or than a third of 1 per cent of global income. Seldom has the international community had an investment opportunity so noble in its objective and so productive in its potential.¹⁷

The ultimate criterion for gauging the integrity of society or the international community... is the way it treats children, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable ones¹⁸.



What is child-centred development?

A child-centred approach recognizes that children’s rights and needs are the primary focus for development. A child grows and develops not in a vacuum but as part of a family, a community, a culture and a nation. Since numerous institutions are accountable for fulfilling the rights of children, a child-centered approach inevitably requires strengthening social systems for care and well-being of the entire society. (see Explanation for Box 2:)



Many different actors and institutions are accountable for children and fulfilling their rights. Each actor has a different role and responsibility in the realization of children’s rights. For example, parents or guardians have duties and obligations that they must protect and care for children. Similarly, the wider community or local government bears a responsibility to enable and support both parents and children. Accountability for children’s rights includes the State, as well as the international community. The realization of children’s rights therefore requires cooperation and synergy between different actors.

The realization of children’s well-being is largely contingent on the care, protection and respect given to them by parents or guardians such as their mothers, fathers, and other family members. Parents and guardians are the first teachers, doctors and nurses to a child, and hence the knowledge, attitudes, practices and skills of primary caregivers and families and the resources available to them are of utmost importance to children.

Capacity building of families must be accompanied by policy-level action by national governments that simultaneously creates a protective environment, enabling of services to ensure that parents and care-givers have a genuine opportunity and adequate support to care for their children.

Establishing community-based basic social services systems and developing the competence to manage and sustain them is a priority. Child-centred community capacity building is obviously based on developing systems of cooperation, support and management in communities to ensure child-care and children's development. Ideally, this should be founded on the equitable participation of all community members particularly women and children. Responding to the holistic needs and the interrelated and indivisible rights of children underscores the importance of developing integrated systems of services.

At the National level, the state needs to support the development of community-based infrastructure with resources, technical expertise, training and enabling policy. Global agreements such as the 20/20 initiative and the promises made at the World Summit for Children, CRC and CEDAW should serve as a broader reference point for national policy. Indeed, the duty of a nation is to ensure a protective and affirmative environment with adequate resources to enable children, their greatest asset, to flourish.

There is no one model or way to apply a child-centred approach to development. However, the components of such an approach are undisputable. Some of the characteristics of child-centered development

- guided by the best interests of the child, nondiscrimination as well as the other principles of CRC and CEDAW.
- involves children's participation as far as possible
- strengthens integrated community-based basic social services
- emphasizes investment and a strategic focus in early childhood care, basic primary education and adolescence.
- strengthens families, and the social and biological status of women.



The lives of children and women are the truest indicators of the strength of communities and Nations. If the youngest and most vulnerable are left to find their way alone, a country violates the rights of its people and sabotages its future as an equal partner in the global economy¹⁹.



- 1 For further detail on this, refer to UNDP (2001) Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme 2001:9.
- 2 UNICEF , 2000, Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, UNICEF, New York p. 6
- 3 <http://www.untreaty.un.org>
- 4 <http://www.unicef.org/sowc98/panel3.htm>
- 5 UNICEF (1999) State of the World's Children, UNICEF, New York, 1999, p. 7
- 6 World Bank, 1998, Child Labor : Issues and Directions for the World Bank, p. i
- 7 UNICEF, 2000, Poverty Reduction Begins with Children UNICEF, New York 2000, p. 1
- 8 <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/rights/>
- 9 UNICEF, Human Rights for Children and Women: How UNICEF helps make them a reality, UNICEF, New York 1999, pp.8-10
- 10 UNICEF, 2000, Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, UNICEF, New York p. 1
- 10 UNICEF, Human Rights for Children and Women: How UNICEF helps make them a reality, UNICEF, New York 1999, p.11.
- 11 UNICEF, Human Rights for Children and Women: How UNICEF helps make them a reality, UNICEF, New York 1999, p 9.
- 12 UNICEF (2002) State of the World's Children, UNICEF, New York, 2002.p.11
- 13 <http://www.unicef.org/sowc98/panel3.htm>
- 14 UNDP, UNESCO,UNFPA, UNICEF,WHO and the World Bank, (1998)Implementing the 20/20 Initiative Achieving Universal Access to Basic Social Services, p. 9
- 15 UNDP, UNESCO,UNFPA, UNICEF,WHO and the World Bank, (1998)Implementing the 20/20 Initiative Achieving Universal Access to Basic Social Services, p. 8
- 16 UNICEF 2000, Absorbing social shocks, protecting children and reducing poverty: the role of basic social services by Jan Vandemoortele, UNICEF Staff Working Papers Evaluation, Policy and Planning Series Number EPP-00-001 p1
- 17 UNICEF, 2000, Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, UNICEF, New York p. 1
- 18 UNICEF, 2000, Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, UNICEF, New York p. 1
- 19 UNICEF (2001) State of the World's Children, UNICEF, New York, 2001.p62