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## Let's Set Realistic Targets For Children in the 80's

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Nineteen seventy-nine is a year of advocacy and action for all children, poor as well as rich. Dr. Estefania Aldaba-Lim examines the different emphases, and pleads for a redress of the global balance during this Year which places the child at the centre of the world.

Consider for a moment the facts and figures related to the status of children in the world today. Half of all annual deaths in the world occur in children below the age of fifteen. In figures, this means thirty million children a year.

The magnitude and seriousness of the situation of children in the developing world are dramatically underscored by the shocking statistics available to us, and they are all the more alarming when viewed side by side with the situation of children in the developed countries.

A 1971 United Nations Report on Children estimates that out of one hundred children born every minute in developing countries, twenty will die within the year. Of the eighty who survive, sixty will have no access to modern medical care in childhood, an equal number will suffer from malnutrition during the crucial weaning age, with the possibility of irreversible physical and mental damage. It is now well known that among children below the age of five in developing countries, malnutrition is an important associated cause of death.

Again, according to the Gwtakin - Grant paper, entitled, **Using Targets to Help Improve Child Health**, it is estimated that of the sixteen million deaths projected for children under five in 1978, more than fifteen million will occur in developing countries. Had these children been born in developed countries, as many as twelve million to thirteen million of them would still be alive.

Equally disturbing is the educational situation of children in the developing world. It is estimated that in 1975 some 120 million children between the ages of six and eleven were out of school. In the poorer countries of Asia and Africa, only about one in every three children attends primary school. In rural areas, the figure may fall as low as 10 per cent. For girls, the situation is even worse. In some countries, less than one out of ten girls of primary school age are in school.

### **Children in the rich world**

Although the majority of children in the developed world are better off than children in the Third World in terms of nutrition and physical health care, serious problems related to their well-being are manifested in many ways. The priorities of developed countries with

respect to children differ somewhat from those of developing countries. Developed countries are paying particular attention to the problems of children subjected to physical abuse, children who are objects and subjects of violence (including TV violence), children exposed to drug addiction, delinquency, the "latch key children", handicapped children and migrant and refugee children.

President Carter has express concern over the mistreatment and neglect of millions of children in the U.S. At a White House ceremony on June 28, when he announced U.S. participation in the International Year of the Child, he said that in the richest country in the world there are a million children whose rights are abused. "I don't think there is an adequate understanding yet," he said, "in our societal structure of this devastating demonstration of carelessness or cruelty."

### Global imbalance

Given such a world picture, the International Year of the Child is indeed a proper occasion for all of us, in developed and developing countries alike, to re-examine our current priorities and preoccupations from the perspective of the future inheritors of this world: our children. The International Year of the Child is a Year for all children, of the poor as well as the rich.

Children stand to benefit from the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that will provide developing countries the wherewithal to improve the lives of their children.

The new world order which is struggling to take shape seeks to replace charity with justice, dependence on the goodwill of others with self-reliance and

self-respect. It is a challenge to reform a world economic structure that has perpetuated the economic subordination of developing countries and crippled their capacity to meet the needs of their children. The improved terms of trade, technology transfer, stabilization of export earnings and an increased share in world industrial production for developing countries, envisaged in the NIEO, would generate the substantial increases in national and **per capita** incomes needed to fuel the drive towards social progress in the developing world, far beyond anything that piecemeal external assistance, however useful, can provide.

### **Merchants of death**

The well-being of children can be directly related to the massive arms build-up, which consumes tremendous monetary and manpower resources that could otherwise be devoted to feeding, clothing, sheltering and educating children and keeping them in good health.

It was pointed out in the 1978 Report on **World Military and Social Expenditures** that "while governments invested over \$3 trillion from 1960 to 1976 in defence against possible attack by external enemies, the threat of internal deterioration was on the rise throughout the world... the number of desperately poor had increased to more than one billion.....the grandiose weapons stockpiled for military defense were increasingly irrelevant to the real problems of the modern world."

Channelling even only five per cent of the \$400 billion annually spent on weapons of death and destruction to the needs of the child would release a mind-boggling \$20 billion a year for immunization and primary health care, adequate nutrition and basic literacy which would allow children to grow into productive adults.

The satisfaction of the basic human needs of child, however, also depends on other inter-related factors, none of which can be pursued in isolation. The persistence of disparities between the situation of children in the developing countries and those in the industrialized world is only one aspect of the global imbalance in the distribution of political and economic power among nations.

### Collective effort needed

When the UN General Assembly proclaimed 1979 as the International Year of the Child, its main objective was to focus the attention and concern of the world community on the needs of children everywhere, and to bring about both immediate and longterm improvements in the lives of millions of children in developed as well as developing countries.

To those who have asked, "what are the objectives of IYC?", we respond that it is up to each country, and to the participating groups in each country, to set the priorities. Each country, naturally, will be primarily concerned with the problems of its own children.

IYC, then, is a collective venture which seeks to draw together the efforts of governments, the United Nations system, interested non-governmental organizations, the mass media and the general public, to strengthen local, national and global commitment to the well-being of children, and to translate this, into concrete actions that will have a lasting impact on children's lives.

In contrast to many international years, IYC will not be marked by a global conference. Its objectives will be achieved by action at the community and country levels. The IYC Secretariat has therefore encouraged governments to establish National Commissions to

formulate the long and short-term measures for children envisaged in IYC.

On the whole the response of governments has been warm and encouraging. The first half of the preparatory period has been marked by the establishment of 86 National IYC Commissions some of which have been functioning since 1977. One hundred and forty-one of the 153 UN Member States have written to express interest in participating in the IYC.

Indicative of the high level of national commitment to IYC is the fact that many Heads of State or First Ladies are patrons or presidents of National Commissions.

### **What are National Commissions doing ?**

For example, the Swedish National Commission for IYC will have two sub-committees. One is concerned with improving the situation of children in Sweden. The other is concerned with increasing the understanding in Sweden of the special situation of children in developing countries.

In India, the National Children's Board has been reconstituted to make it more cohesive and manageable.

In Nigeria, IYC Committees are being established even at state and local government levels. And the Nigerian chapter of the International Federation of Women Lawyers, with the Nigerian Council of Women's Societies, is conducting a legal study of the current status of children.

In an exhaustive programme in Tanzania, greater emphasis is being placed, for example, on nursery education for children to age six. Regional authorities have been asked to find means of solving transport

problems which face children who attend day schools in towns.

Research on the nomad child and a study on farm collectives are part of Mali's plans.

Mexico's National System for the Integral Development of the Family, together with UNICEF, has developed a preparatory programme with four basic themes: preventive medicine, education, social promotion and community development.

### **Advocacy and action**

In the course of our advocacy for efforts for IYC in various parts of the world, we have constantly urged governments and National Commissions established for IYC.

(1) to review the situation of children, including policies and legislation relating to them, and to gather basic data and information on their nutritional, health and educational status (especially in developing countries), as well as all other programme priorities such as violence and abuse of children, drug addiction, prostitution, abandoned children, physically and mentally handicapped children, suicide, children of migrant families, and refugees;

(2) to review the outreach of existing programmes for children;

(3) to determine priorities and, where possible, to set targets that can serve as guidelines for action and measurements of progress, not only for 1979, but far beyond that, on a more permanent basis.



These are the starting points for the development of action programmes that can effectively meet the basic needs of children. Towards this objective, IYC is encouraging the search and application of new and innovative combinations of effort involving governments, non-governmental organizations, organizations of the UN system and bilateral aid agencies, that could help bridge the gap between need and fulfillment, where the development of the child is concerned. Increasing emphasis is being placed on the mobilization of resources within each community for the provision of primary health care to the rural child and the delivery of basic services espoused by UNICEF.

### Critical link

The world has failed to give attention to the critical link between the shape of human destiny and the care our children receive today. By failing to place children in the position they deserve—at the top of our social, political and economic priorities—we are sowing the seeds of future trouble and disaster.

Our children do not vote and have no political constituency. Our children have no spokesman to champion their cause, no universal ombudsman to hear their grievances and petitions. No universal mechanism exists today to guarantee their survival, to ensure that their needs are met and their rights protected.

The International Year of the Child is a unique opportunity to focus the world's consciousness on children. It is our once-in-a-lifetime chance to give children the high priority they deserve in the national and international agenda, not for their sake alone, but for the sake of all humanity.