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UNICEF: From Post-War Emergency Aid to Child Rights Leader

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the past half century UNICEF has evolved from an emergency body created to help children in post-war Europe to a leading child rights organisation, active in 162 countries and territories. Guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF strives to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children. UNICEF insists that the survival, protection, and development of children are universal development imperatives that are integral to human progress. UNICEF mobilises political will and material resources to help countries, particularly developing countries, ensure that they put children first, and to build their capacity to form appropriate policies and deliver services for children and their families. In everything it does, the most disadvantaged children and the countries in greatest need have priority. UNICEF receives no direct funding from the United Nations - instead its income comes from governments, from direct fund-raising, and through the sale of greeting cards and products.

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**ARTICLE**

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Say UNICEF to most people and their response will invariably be 'greeting cards'. Who has not at some time or other received one of these popular and poignant reminders that children are precious? UNICEF cards have become an enduring tradition worldwide ever since a little girl emerging from the horrors of World War 11 sat

down to paint a watercolour expressing her gratitude to UNICEF for the help given her devastated village in the former Czechoslovakia. She painted children dancing happily around a maypole. Her sketch was sent to UNICEF, and two years later, it was issued as UNICEF's first year-end greeting card.

Created initially by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 as an emergency measure to help children facing famine and disease in Europe, UNICEF's role was soon extended to working with children and their families in the world's poorest countries. In 1953, UNICEF became a permanent part of the United Nations system, with a mandate to help children living in poverty in the developing world.

Since then the United Nations Children's Fund has become an enduring tradition in its own right, working with national governments, NGOs, other United Nations agencies, and private-sector partners to protect children and their rights. This is done by providing services and supplies and by helping shape policy agendas and budgets in the best interests of children.

UNICEF operates in more than 160 developing countries, relying on voluntary contributions from governments, foundations, corporations and individuals to carry out its life-saving work in child health, nutrition, education, and child protection. Underpinning all its work for children is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world, the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **Promoting the rights of children**

Adopted by the United Nations more than a decade ago, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is used by countries around the world to help promote the rights of children and to bolster government efforts to serve families. This important document sets forth basic norms and standards, which individual nations agree to pursue on behalf of their children.

Emphasising the *primacy and importance* of the role and authority of parents, the treaty calls for governments to respect the responsibilities, rights, and duties of parents to provide direction and guidance for the development of their children. In addition, it calls on governments to develop policies conducive to family and community environments that will allow children to grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding.

The Convention's internationally recognised norms include protection from violence, abuse, and abduction, protection from dangerous work and exploitation, adequate healthy food, free

compulsory primary education, adequate health care, and equal treatment regardless of gender, race, or cultural background.

Recognising the special vulnerability of children and their need for guidance, all of these goals are expressed with respect to the child's age and maturity; the child's best interests are always the paramount concern.

### **Still a long way to go**

Despite the remarkable progress the human race has made over the past decade, the sad reality is that every day more than 30,000 children around the world still die of preventable diseases.

Eleven years ago, at the World Summit for Children, world leaders came together to commit themselves to giving every child a better future. Since then, much progress has been made. Millions of young lives have been saved, more children than ever before are in school, more children are actively involved in decisions concerning their lives, and important treaties have been concluded to protect children.

In short, the 1990s was a decade of great promises and modest achievements for the world's children. The Summit and the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of the Child helped accord political priority to children. A record number of countries - 192 - ratified, acceded to, or signed the Convention.

There were many tangible results for children: this year, three million fewer children will die than a decade ago; through salt iodisation, 90 million newborns are protected every year from a significant loss of learning ability; and polio has been brought to the brink of eradication. The eradication of polio alone would save the world almost \$3 billion Australian dollars a year, which could then be directed toward other diseases.

Yet much more needs to be done. The resources that were promised at the Summit at both the national and international levels have yet to fully materialise. Critical challenges remain: more than 10 million children die each year, although most of those deaths could be prevented; 100 million children are still out of school, 60 per cent of them girls; 150 million children suffer from malnutrition; and HIV/AIDS is spreading with catastrophic speed. There is persistent poverty, exclusion and discrimination, and inadequate investment in social services.

Also, debt burdens, excessive military spending inconsistent with national security requirements, armed conflict, foreign occupation,

hostage-taking and all forms of terrorism, as well as the lack of efficient use of resources, among other factors, can constrain national efforts to combat poverty and to ensure the well-being of children. The childhood of millions continues to be devastated by hazardous and exploitative labour, the sale and trafficking of children, including young people, and other forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence.

A brighter future for all has remained elusive, and overall gains have fallen short of national obligations and international commitments.

### **UN Special Session on Children**

Eleven years after the World Summit, in May 2002 world leaders came together once more to advance the cause of children at the United Nations Special Session on Children in New York.

It was clear what needed to be done. Chronic poverty remains the single biggest obstacle to meeting the needs of children, and protecting and promoting their rights. Globally, one in four children lives in abject poverty - in families with income of less than \$US1 a day. In developing countries the percentage of children living in abject poverty jumps to one in three. Children are hardest hit by poverty because it strikes at the very roots of their potential for development - their growing bodies and minds.

Tackling poverty, therefore, requires an assault on all fronts. From the provision of basic social services to the creation of employment opportunities, from the availability of micro-credit to investment in infrastructure, and from debt relief to fair trade practices. Eradication of poverty and reduction of disparities must therefore be a key objective of development efforts.

Participants to the Special Session pledged to spare no effort in continuing with the creation of a world fit for children, building on the achievements of the past decade. A world fit for children, they agreed, was one in which all children receive the best possible start in life and have access to a quality basic education, including primary education that is compulsory and available free to all, and in which all children, including young people, have ample opportunity to develop their individual capacities in a safe and supportive environment.

### **Making a difference**

The United Nations Children's Fund estimates there are 2.1 billion children in the world, accounting for 36 per cent of the world's population, with some 132 million children born each year.

In the face of these enormous global challenges, it is easy to feel powerless, to shrug one's shoulders and plead defeat. But there is something that each of us can do through UNICEF to advance the cause of the world's most vulnerable citizens - and that is to become a supporter of the popular UNICEF greeting cards, not only at Christmas but all year round.

Taking the first step can lead to big things - as evidenced by that very first drawing by a grateful seven year-old survivor of war in Czechoslovakia, which was reproduced as the first UNICEF card in 1949. The simple idea of a greeting card being used to raise money to improve children's lives in the poorest countries caught on rapidly, attracting artists of the highest calibre, including some of the best known artists of the 20th century.

Henri Matisse, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dali, and Raoul Dufy were all inspired by UNICEF's work. Fifty years later, prominent names such as Magnum Photographers and high-profile contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg, Bill Viola, Pipilotti Rist, Yayoi Kasuma, and Sharin Neshat continue the tradition started in 1949.

With the sale of just one pack of UNICEF greeting cards, UNICEF can provide enough supplies to vaccinate 22 children against polio, or 42 children against measles. A little goes a long way. Since the cards first went on sale, more than 4 billion UNICEF greeting cards have been sold, providing UNICEF with over \$1 billion in financial support - a critical factor in UNICEF's remarkable achievements on behalf of the world's children.

A generation ago, 70,000 children died each day. Today that number has been cut in half. Thirty years ago, one in four children died before the age of five. Today that number is less than one in ten. In 1980, 10 percent of the world's children were immunised against the six killer diseases. Today, that number is up to 80 per cent. And this year, 2.5 million more children will live to their fifth birthday than in 1990, while tens of millions will lead healthier, more productive lives.

And often, even before those cards reach an outlet near you in the developed world, they are working to help generate income for poor communities. In Nepal for instance, over the past 20 years a program whereby villagers make paper and greeting cards for UNICEF's international collection has been benefiting local craftspeople and their families. Each season villagers from the

uplands harvest bark from a local shrub. Local craftsmen from the lower valleys collect the bark and transform it into beautiful homemade paper.

Today the Bhaktapur Craft Printers project helps to support 3,000 families, across five regions of Nepal, and is a financially self-sufficient business. Profits from the sale of the cards and paper are invested back into the community to help provide education, sanitation and, clean water.

Our children are not an expense, they are an investment. And each one of us can choose to contribute to this global investment.

UNICEF will be releasing its new Christmas and greeting card catalogues for both consumers and corporations in September 2002. Information on how to order these cards can be found at <http://www.supportunicef.org/>, and general information about UNICEF and its activities can be found at [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).

In Australia, catalogues can be ordered via UNICEF Australia's website at [www.unicef.org.au](http://www.unicef.org.au), or by calling 1300 884 233. Cards will be on sale at OPSM, MBF, Laubman & Pank, Ikea, and participating pharmacies. A full list of card stockists will be available on the website.

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