

Statement by Elizabeth Gibbons, Unicef Representative,
to The House Of Commons
on the occasion of the launch of the study
“*Child Poverty In The Developing World*”

Tuesday, 21 October 2003

Mr. Speaker, Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We have reached a point in human history where it is now obvious that poverty and ignorance threaten human security as surely as any weapon of mass destruction.

There are those who argue that poverty and its discontents have always been with us and always will be. Yet today, the persistence and global scale of poverty - and the grotesque inequality that underlies it – is widely recognised not only as a moral outrage, but a growing threat to world peace and stability.

That is why this in-depth study, *Child Poverty in the Developing World*, is so important – and why I am so pleased to be here this evening for its launch, which includes the opportunity to pay tribute to the scholarship and writing skill of Professors Townsend, Gordon and their research team.

Thanks to their pioneering methodology, the world now can measure the extent of child poverty, not in terms of income, but in the denial of their basic human rights to such necessities of life as shelter, food, water, health, education and information.

The result is that the picture that emerges from the study is that much more disheartening. For we are also at a moment in history where the exercise of responsible and enlightened leadership must begin with a recognition that over one billion children – more than half of all the children living in developing countries – suffer from severe deprivation of basic human rights.

In a global economy worth well over \$30 trillion, nearly 3 billion people - almost half of humanity - live on less than \$2 a day. And 1.3 billion of them exist at the very margins of human dignity, making do with less than \$1 a day.

We use dollar terms to describe their plight. But poverty is much more than an economic issue. A malnourished infant, a subjugated girl child, a child soldier - all are effectively enslaved by poverty and social exclusion, deprived not only in their potential to grow, but also of their right to become responsible and productive citizens.

The physical, emotional and intellectual impairment that poverty inflicts on children can mean a lifetime of suffering and want - and a legacy of poverty for the next generation, and a drag on the economic and social development of a nation. These are among the reasons why the conquest of poverty has become the overarching Millennium goal of the United Nations. Clearly, no effort to reduce poverty can succeed without first tackling its many manifestations and impact on children and the realisation of their rights.

As UNICEF’s Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, stressed two years ago at the Conference on Eliminating Child Poverty convened by Chancellor Gordon Brown in this

city: "Eradication of the worst manifestations of poverty is not only a moral imperative. It is a practical and affordable possibility - and it starts with investing in children".

UNICEF has extensive experience in supporting programmes which enable children to grow into health and productive adults: young children must be breastfed, have access to safe drinking water, unpolluted air, loving care. They and older children must live where there is adequate sanitation and waste-disposal practices, in environments that are healthy and free of disease. All girls and boys must be able to attend and achieve in school, and be protected from injury, with time and space to play, to explore, and to learn. Yet we also know that too often, poverty deprives children of these necessary foundations for their future.

Hence, to understand and hence better address the deprivations of basic rights suffered by children in poverty, as well as to have an accurate direct measure of child poverty, UNICEF commissioned the study which, Honourable Members of Parliament, is presented to you today.

Results from the study are striking. We learn that:

- One child of every three lives in a dwelling with more than five people per room, or with a mud floor.
- Over half a billion children have no toilet facilities whatsoever.
- Over 20 per cent of children (nearly 376 million) are using unsafe (open) water sources or have more than a 15-minute walk to water.

- Over 15 per cent of children under five in the developing world are severely malnourished, over half of whom (91 million children) are in South Asia.

- 265 million children (15 per cent) have not been immunised against any diseases, or have had a recent illness causing diarrhoea and have received no medical advice or treatment.

- 134 million children aged 7 to 18 (13 per cent) are severely educationally deprived; they have never been to school.

- Girls are more likely to be severely educationally deprived than boys, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, where they are three times more likely than boys to have never attended to school.

In ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 192 countries committed themselves to take all appropriate measures, using all available resources, to ensure the survival, protection, and full development of every child.

Ratifying the Convention was among the commitments made during the World Summit for Children in 1990. Through concerted efforts, the situation of children improved. The gains for children in the 1990s demonstrated what can be done when commitments are matched by resources and political will. For example the average under-five mortality rate declined by 11 per cent globally; rates of diarrhoeal disease were reduced by half during the decade, saving the lives of 1.5 million children annually.

However, for all the millions of young lives that have been saved, and for all the futures that have been enhanced, there is much more work to do. Many key survival and development goals that were set at the World Summit for Children have yet to be

met in critical areas such as basic education, under-5 mortality, maternal mortality, child malnutrition, water and sanitation. More than 1.2 billion people survive on less than \$1 a day and, excluding China, the number of extremely poor people actually increased by 28 million during the 90s. Over the last two decades income inequality worsened in 33 of the 66 developing countries with data.

The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children, held last year, adopted a bold new agenda for child rights. Under the title of *A World Fit for Children*, The Declaration and Plan of Action of the Special Session made a commitment to complete the unfinished agenda of the World Summit. And it refined and endorsed many child-specific goals distilled from other major UN Conferences and Summits of the last decade.

Promoting healthy lives, providing quality basic education, protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence, and combating HIV/AIDS, are the four key pillars of the World Fit for Children agenda.

The ultimate objective is to create a child-friendly world:

- where all children get the best possible start in life,
- where all children have access to quality basic education,
- and where all youngsters have ample opportunity to grow to their full human potential.

A child friendly world is also one where the human rights of children are respected, where democracy flourishes and where poverty is not an insurmountable barrier to human progress.

On pursuing this world, UNICEF collaborates closely with United Kingdom Department for International Development, DFID, both internationally and at the field level. I want in this occasion thank DFID for its permanent support and effective partnerships.

Investing fully in children today will ensure the well being and productivity of future generations for decades to come - and UNICEF is convinced that quality basic education, particularly the education of girls, is an essential prerequisite of any global anti-poverty strategy.

Girls' education is a proven "best investment" for human, social, and economic development. But most importantly, it is every girl's right – and to forget this is to imperil our global future. A majority of the 120 million children currently not in school are girls – and their education will make a major contribution to the larger, better prepared work force that the future demands.

Moreover, education for girls is the key to the health and nutrition of populations; to overall improvements in the standard of living; to better agricultural and environmental practices; to higher Gross National Product; and to greater involvement and gender balance in decision-making at all levels of society.

Only education can equip girls with the confidence to make the most of their abilities; provide a forum for changing attitudes about violence while promoting equality; and help put young women on a path to economic empowerment – a position from which they can better protect themselves from gender-based violence.

In short, there can be no significant or sustainable transformation in societies and no significant reduction in poverty until girls receive the quality basic education they need to take their rightful place as equal partners in development.

Regrettably, current pledges fall far short of the contribution the international community must make if the Millennium Development Goals and the agenda of *A World Fit for Children* are to be implemented or the more than one billion children living in poverty in the developing world.

It is estimated that the aid for development should increase from just over \$50 billion a year today to \$100 billion per year in the years to 2015. To ensure that resources are available for children now, UNICEF strongly supports the recently unveiled proposal to speed up spending required to reach the MDGs through an International Finance Facility (IFF). This proposal intends to raise funds by leveraging donors' commitments for increased ODA. It is a practical way of accelerating a process that can not wait.

Let me conclude with the voices of child delegates as they spoke to the Special Session last May. They said:

"We are the world's children.

We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone.

In this world,

We see respect for the rights of the child

We see an end to the vicious cycle of poverty

We see the active participation of children

We are not the sources of problems; we are the resources that are needed to solve them.

We are not expenses; we are investments.

And they reminded each of us, the adults in this room tonight:

"You call us the future, but we are also the present."

Many thanks.