

Special Session Update

NGOs working together for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children

THE HORSE-TRADING CONTINUES

As always at United Nations' summits, most conference results have been settled in advance. But when Ambassador Durrant formally brought the gavel down on the third PrepCom at 5.55 on Monday evening after several days additional negotiations she said she was "really disappointed" that the draft conference declaration, *A World Fit for Children*, was still incomplete. Half-an-hour later a small drafting group set about the task of finishing the job, having been instructed to work today (Tuesday) and "if necessary, into the night".

Key bones of contention are:

* **Money:** Secretary-General Kofi Annan says that the failure to meet the goals set by the World's Summit for Children in 1990 was caused by insufficient investment. Developing countries will say progress for children depends on firm financial commitments by industrialised countries; industrialised countries will say progress depends more on the correct policies in developing countries.

* **Sex:** the United States and a number of governments linked closely to Christian and Islamic interests oppose any conference text references to abortion, sex education, family planning and reproductive health.

* **Rights:** the same countries will seek to limit references to children's rights: it is the parents' job to bring up children, they argue. There is also a tussle between countries who want the conference text to reinforce and build on the role of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, and countries, notably the United States, which dislike the idea of rights for children and want parents - and governments - to be left to make decisions.

* **Family:** countries with religious affiliations (including the Vatican, which will exert its usual influence even though it is not a UN member) accept references to "family" only if it means mother, father and children: some, mainly in Europe, favour a definition that embraces the reality that millions of families around the world are headed by a single parent, grandparent or child or even perhaps same-sex couples.

* **Children's participation** was a big issue in the preparatory meetings but it is too late for major controversy now because the format for children's contributions to the Summit have already been finalised.

Several other specific issues could generate haggling, including -

* **Child labour:** India and other countries where the issue is widespread argue that references, if any, should take account of the economic and social realities in which the practice is grounded.

* **Death penalty and corporal punishment:** Europe opposes both, the US says “Hands off - it’s our right to decide.”

* **Middle East:** every UN conference struggles to deal with attempts by Islamic states to condemn Israel and refer to the special needs of the Occupied Territories and to US resistance to their demands. This dispute will almost certainly be even more bitter because of the recent Israeli attacks on Palestinian territory.

US POSITION

Because of its global dominance, Washington will play a key role. The policy of the current US administration - typified by Monday’s announcement that it will “unsign” the treaty creating an international criminal court - is to take a tougher, more nationalistic approach to international negotiations, and to be **less interested in compromise**. The US’ conference position reflects the pro-sexual abstinence, anti-abortion, pro-nuclear family, anti-rights agenda of the Christian Right.

Also of potential significance: the well-organised negotiating line taken at the last preparatory meeting by a group of developing countries, largely but not exclusively Islamic, led by Malaysia. To some extent the group appeared to have taken over from the “Group of 77” developing countries, which has become weak and indecisive.

CONFLICT AND COMPROMISE

Countries most concerned with particular disputes go into side-rooms and hammer out a compromise, usually either a form of words that glosses over the conflict, or a trade-off. The UK, for example, is strong on reproductive rights but might trade off clear language on this issue in the conference document for concessions from, say, the US on corporal punishment.

THE DEADLINE

If the drafting group charged with finding compromises fails to complete its task by Tuesday night, and further negotiations during the week also fail, there are three possibilities:

- (a) issues are put to a vote, with a late finish on Friday
- (b) unresolved wording is simply removed from the document
- (c) the “Durban racism conference approach” - that is, chaos, with agreement where possible and unresolved problems sorted out after the conference.

NGO CONSENSUS UNDER THREAT

The liberal consensus of the NGO lobby at the UN started to collapse at the last preparatory meeting, as some Islamic groups and Christian fundamentalist organisations showed not only that they operated outside the consensus on which NGOs have operated for many years, but that they were prepared to break up NGO meetings if their demands were not met. For example, US anti-abortion activists tried to insist that the NGO caucus on children in conflict condemn abortion.

CHILDREN'S SUMMIT SPOTLIGHTS GOVERNMENTS' FAILURES, SAYS CAUCUS

The United Nations "Children's Summit" is in danger of simply ushering in another decade of broken promises, a caucus of children's advocates said Monday.

Some 70 heads of state arrive in New York this week to evaluate global progress for children and adopt a new plan of action. The plan has been under negotiation for more than a year, but focuses primarily on previous commitments, and offers weak follow-up mechanisms.

"Millions of children are today denied basic rights and suffer unconscionable abuse because governments have failed to live up to their commitments," said Bill Bell of Save the Children UK, speaking on behalf of the Child Rights Caucus, a coalition of more than 100 national and international non-governmental organisations.

Over 125 million children are not in school; 250 million children are involved in child labour, including millions who are victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking; 2 million children have died in ten years and up to 25 million have been uprooted by armed conflict. 10 million children a year die from malnutrition and preventable diseases.

The two most controversial issues still being negotiated are related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the rights of adolescents to sexual and reproductive health education and services. On both issues, the United States is a major obstacle to agreement.

"The US has tried to sideline the Convention on the Rights of the Child as the global standard for protecting the rights of children," said Jo Becker of Human Rights Watch. "It is also seeking to roll

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ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

THE UN COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thursday, May 9 2002
Church Center, Second Floor
11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m

Part I: The Role of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Plan of Action of the Special Session

Part II: NGOs and the Committee Monitoring Process: experiences using the system

Participants

- * Jaap Doek, Chair, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
- * Anne Bayefsky, Columbia Law School
- * Paolo David, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (to be confirmed)
- * Maria Green, International Anti-Poverty Law Center
- * Andrea Khan, Child Rights Information Network (CRIN)
- * Lesley Miller, UNICEF
- * Laura Theytaz, NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child

back previous agreements to provide adolescents with sexual and reproductive health education and services.”

The United States and Somalia are the only countries that have not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since 1989, 191 countries have ratified the Convention, making it the most widely ratified treaty in history.

The Child Rights Caucus welcomed the Special Session’s attention to protecting children from abuse, violence and exploitation, issues that were virtually ignored in 1990. But it criticised the mechanisms for follow-up and monitoring the Session’s outcome document, which are too weak to ensure that governments were held accountable for their pledges. For example, the primary international monitoring body for children – the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – had been given no additional support, even though it has already fallen way behind in reviewing governments’ actions.

The Caucus said that an effective action plan was vital to make up for the “broken promises” of the decade since the 1990 World Summit for Children, but criticised governments for failing to allocate adequate resources to children. During the 1990’s, international development assistance fell to new lows, and developing countries allocated only 12-14 percent of national budgets to basic social services. Despite pledges to support universal access to education, only 2% of international aid goes to provide schooling in poor countries.

“Promises are easily made,” said Ms. Becker, “but the challenge for the next decade is to ensure that governments live up to their commitments. Without sufficient political will and resources, the stage is set for another decade of broken promises.”

The Child Rights Caucus – Background

The Child Rights Caucus includes over 100 national and international organisations from around the world that are committed to promoting and protecting the rights of children. It is the largest NGO lobbying body related to the UN Special Session. Its members include human rights organisations, international development NGOs and groups working on specific issues such as education, child and adolescent health, child labour, armed conflict, etc.

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USA THREATENS WALK-OUT

The United States took centre-stage on the eve of the Children's Summit yesterday when it threatened to walk out of informal negotiations and, in a separate incident, was attacked by a leading NGO group as "negative and obstructionist."

The walk-out warning came in response to Ambassador Durrant's compromise text, the subject of intense discussions by two small working groups throughout the day. Declaring dissatisfaction with the text, a US negotiator reportedly said his delegation was not prepared to work on it and might not appear at the negotiating table.

A colleague from a friendly country told this publication that he thought the threat was an impetuous reaction, and should not be taken too seriously.

But it fuelled already lively corridor speculation about how the conference would deal with a negotiating impasse [*See Special Session Update No. 1*]. One suggested option was that the conference declaration, *A World Fit For Children* (currently known as the Draft Outcome Document) might refer to a US opt-out from the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The US came under attack at a mid-day news conference by the Child Rights Caucus, a coalition of more than 100 NGOs from around the world. Spokeswoman Jo Becker said the group was disappointed with Washington's "negative, obstructionist role" on reproductive rights and on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention was being sidelined in the negotiations, largely as a result of US pressure, she said. Washington was also trying to roll back previous agreements on providing adolescents with sexual and reproductive health education and services: "It is my understanding that the Bush Administration has said it will not accept previous language from UN conferences, such as the Beijing Women's Conference."

Arab countries were backing the US, and the Some Developing Countries (SDC) group, led by Sudan, shared some US positions.*

In addition, Youssef Hajjar of the Arab Resource Collective emphasised that the Catholic Church was putting "tremendous pressure" on Argentina and other South American governments to revert to the more restrictive attitudes of an earlier era, and many Catholic and anti-abortion groups in so-called developed countries were also trying to block a rights-based approach to children's issues.

Bene Madanagu from the Girls Power Initiative joined the attack at the press conference. "It is appalling that the US is advancing retrogressive and conservative ideology that is deliberately creating ignorance and confusion by suggesting that abstinence could control HIV/AIDS," she fumed. "Young people in developing countries are being devastated by HIV/AIDS – and this could create a

situation in which teenagers are deprived of information about health, sexuality and even menstruation.” The result would be more ill-health and death.

She accused the US of trying to press states that had ratified the Convention not to implement it.

* The SDC group, which emerged as a well-organised force during the third preparatory meeting in June, was yesterday privately criticised by at least one Western delegate for taking such a hard line in negotiations – an assessment that group might take as a compliment.

'LIKE-MINDED' IN THE NEGOTIATIONS

Members of the “Like-minded group”, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway and South Korea, have become more active in the current round of negotiations, with a strong position in support of the CRC and sexual and reproductive health issues, joining the EU, Rio Group and SDC as a negotiating block.

CHILD SOLDIERS PLEDGE FOR INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

Olara Otunnu, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, said yesterday that when the International Criminal Court was established he would work to ensure that people responsible for recruiting child soldiers were among the first to be indicted.

He was speaking at the second of two meetings on child soldiers, both of which featured short, moving speeches by child victims of war, including two former child soldiers.

“I don’t think I could ask even my worst enemy to go through what I went through. It’s too painful. I don’t feel like any other human being,” said China, who was forced to take up arms when she was nine.

Ishmael joined up when he was 14 “to get revenge for my parents’ deaths. But I was killing other people’s parents. It’s a disturbing cycle of revenge.”

At an earlier meeting, a Security Council session on children in conflict, 17-year-old Elisa brought a message to diplomats and ministers from the Children’s Forum: “War and politics have always been an adult game but children have always been the losers.”

And she urged, “I hope you will remember my words.”

It marked the second time that a child has addressed the Security Council.

At another session on the issue, presented on Monday by the US Council on Foreign Relations, participants were told that the existence of several international legal instruments meant there could be real international action against people who used children as soldiers, including a protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, three Security Council Resolutions on children and armed conflict, and the Convention itself. But the International Criminal Court would be the strongest mechanism of all.

Once the Court was activated after July, said Otunnu, the priority would be to “activate the international court of public opinion.”

CHILD RIGHTS CAUCUS FIGHTS ON

The Child Rights Caucus, the largest NGO lobbying body at the Special Session, agreed yesterday to continue its work after the Summit. The feeling at the meeting was that it had been effective in bringing a strong body of NGO experience to the Special Session negotiations and that the momentum it had generated would be useful for future action around child rights.

The Caucus includes over 100 national and international organisations around the world committed to promoting and protecting the rights of children. Members include human rights organisations, international development NGOs and groups working on specific issues such as education, child and adolescent health, child labour and armed conflict.

It will hold one more meeting on Thursday at 5-6pm to discuss whether or not to issue a final news release at the close of the Special Session.

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US SLAMS GOVERNMENTS FOR 'INCREDIBLY DISAPPOINTING DRAFT DECLARATION'

A powerful defence of the United States' position in the Special Session negotiations was given yesterday by Michael Dennis of the State Department, who accused other governments of watering down the "incredibly disappointing" draft conference declaration.

"Unfortunately, many states are more interested in protecting their own national priorities than in the general welfare of children," he told a briefing for US non-government organisations.

Describing the US as a global leader in child protection, he said that his government had promoted a number of specific recommendations during the Special Session negotiations, such as limiting the role of children in armed conflict, but other delegates had favoured generalisations.

"Every proposal we put on the table was rejected," he said. "It [the draft declaration] is down to the lowest common denominator," he commented.

Categorically refuting allegations that President George Bush's Washington had retreated from positions adopted by the Ronald Reagan Administration, Dennis said it was other governments that had moved away, not the US.

These countries insisted on talking only about child rights in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was detrimental to children's interests because the Convention was weak in certain areas, such as trafficking, prostitution, the sale of children and pornography. The US had taken a lead in adopting protocols covering these areas, whereas European countries had weaker laws and therefore favoured the generalised language of the Convention.

The Convention was an important standard for legislation on the rights of the child, he said, but the US would not accept it as the only one. The US probably had the best child protection laws in the world, he emphasised.

LATE-NIGHT LOBBYISTS PUT THEIR CARDS ON THE TABLE

At about 11.30 last night Carol Bellamy took the elevator down to the lobby in UNICEF headquarters (where negotiations to secure conference consensus had been underway for hours), and was faced by two rival lobbying groups. "We are trying to ensure that governments advance on agreements that have been supporting young people and adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights," said Jennifer Curran of the Youth Coalition, referring to agreements reached at the International Conference on Population and Development. Her organisation - some of whose members were whiling away the time by playing cards and Clue - is part of the International Sexual and Reproductive

Rights Coalition, which organised the vigil because of concern that the Special Session might retreat from previous international commitments.

A few metres away, an ultra-conservative group were handing tired delegates flyers claiming that “UNICEF curriculum states that reproductive health includes abortion” and “UNICEF sex education promotes homosexuality and bestiality.”

Pointing at the other group, Curran said, “We’re basically trying to keep an eye on them.”

TEXT RESERVATIONS COULD SAVE THE CONFERENCE, SAYS SENATOR

Major areas of disagreement at the conference could be bridged by a simple device, according to US Senator Timothy E. Wirth, president of the United Nations Foundation, who has been involved in several similar conference negotiations.

At a briefing yesterday he identified the three unresolved issues as:

* language related to rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention had been negotiated without dissent but later became incorrectly defined “in certain quarters” as asserting children’s rights at the expense of the rights, roles and responsibilities of parents.

* language relating to reproductive health services. Some critics had claimed, incorrectly, that the text might encourage abortion.

* provision of sex education and reproductive health services for adolescents. Some delegations favoured an “abstinence-only” approach, while others believed that a comprehensive approach that included abstinence made more sense.

Wirth recalled the pragmatism of the Holy See at the 1994 population and development conference. Its delegation was troubled by a few words and phrases: “Rather than block consensus on the text and bring down the entire conference, the Holy See signed on to the Programme of Action, but expressed several reservations on certain paragraphs.”

This, he suggested, was a viable option for the handful of countries at the Special Session who found certain parts of the text objectionable but wanted the conference to be successful.

He also said that experience showed that strong reaffirmation of each nation’s sovereign rights went a long way to resolving disputes. The conference declaration was a loose and general agreement, which it was up to individual governments to interpret.

NGO INFILTRATION

During a meeting of the small negotiating group trying to sort out remaining textual differences in the conference declaration yesterday, the group’s coordinator, Ambassador Hanns Schumacher was asked a series of questions about possible procedures for securing agreement. He patiently and carefully replied to the questions, before inquiring which country the questioner represented. At that moment, his interrogator – the head of an NGO - realised she was in the wrong meeting, which was restricted to government delegates. Schumacher accepted her embarrassed apologies and said the questions had been very pertinent.

Before the unveiling of the unwitting intruder, Schumacher told delegates he hoped that he would be able to announce to the plenary on Thursday morning how the discussions could be moved forward to enable completion of *A World Fit For Children*.

A WORLD FIT FOR US

... We pledge an equal partnership in this fight for children's rights. And while we promise to support the actions you take on behalf of children, we also ask for your commitment and support in the actions we are taking - because the children of the world are misunderstood.

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

We are not expenses; we are investments.

We are not just young people; we are people and citizens of this world.

Until others accept their responsibility to us, we will fight for our rights. We have the will, the knowledge, the sensitivity and the dedication. We promise that as adults we will defend children's rights with the same passion that we have now as children.

We promise to treat each other with dignity and respect. We promise to be open and sensitive to our differences.

We are the children of the world, and despite our different backgrounds, we share a common reality.

We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place for all.

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

From 'A World Fit for Us', message from the Children's Forum Message. Meeting of Under-18 Delegates to the United Nations Special Session on Children. For the complete declaration go to:

<http://www.un.org/ga/children/cfmE.htm>

IN BRIEF

* Visas for all members of the Iraqi delegation to the Special Session were refused by the US government. UNICEF said yesterday that there had been no other serious refusals.

* "For the first time in the history of the UN they [children] are being heard" - UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy.

* 'We've gained from today,' said Tom Burke, an Under-18 delegate. But he hopes next that adults will come to realise that 'child participation' is more than a tool.

* Secretary-General Kofi Annan addressed his opening remarks directly to the children of the world, saying "You have a right to live a live a safe life from the threat of war, abuse and exploitation... These rights are obvious," he said. "Yet we, the grown-ups have failed you deplorably in upholding many of them."

* "We have 10-15 years to see if they have been listening" - child delegate Audrey Cheynut on being asked whether she thought governments would live up to their pledges on children.

* "You call us the future, but we are also the present" - declaration by the Children's Forum, *A World Fit For Us*.

* "We had only three minutes to present our views to the General Assembly" - Children's Forum participant Alex Rosu, asked for his criticisms of the arrangements for children's participation.

* "We must get the world moving, literally," Tommy Thompson, US Secretary of Health and Human Services, told the Special Session. He was commenting on the World Health Organization's decision

to make physical activity and fitness its priority for the year. It is particularly a problem in the US, he admitted, where the number of overweight children has tripled in the past two decades.

* Invited to comment on a rumour that Washington was pressing UNICEF to reduce references to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in all its documents, Jo Becker of the Child Rights Caucus looked surprised and said she had heard nothing of the kind, before adding, “It would be appalling.”

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★★★★ Somalia yesterday became the last country in the world to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child. East Timor has said that after the country's independence on 20 May, the Convention will be the first international agreement to be signed by the new government. ★★★★★

SPECIAL SESSION 'IN JEOPARDY'

After almost two years of lobbying to secure a strong rights-based approach in *A World Fit for Children*, the Child Rights Caucus – a coalition of more than 100 organisations – yesterday voiced disappointment with the results. A Caucus spokesperson said they believed the United States was largely to blame and they had sent a letter of protest to the US delegation:

Open Letter to the Honorable Tommy Thompson, US Secretary of Health and Human Services and the United States delegation to the UN Special Session on Children:

As non-governmental organizations from the U.S. and around the world that are devoted to promoting and protecting the rights of children, we are deeply disappointed in the position that the United States has taken during the negotiations on the outcome document for the Special Session related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, sexual and reproductive health education and services, and the death penalty. These positions neither reflect the reality of children's lives, nor the international framework of children's rights that has developed over the last twelve years. By rigidly maintaining its positions on these issues, the United States is putting the success of this Special Session in jeopardy.

We welcome the United States' support of the Optional Protocols to the Convention, and its ratification of ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor. However, the US' attempt to sideline the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the outcome document is an attack against the global consensus on the human rights of children that has built over the last twelve years. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is not only the most comprehensive international legal standard for children, but also the most rapidly and widely ratified treaty in history. It is the logical starting point and centerpiece of any international plan of action for children. Although not a state party, the United States should acknowledge the Convention's international significance as the global standard for children's rights.

The US' position of promoting abstinence as the primary strategy for dealing with adolescent sexuality is both naïve and inappropriate. For the millions of girls who marry before age 18 or who are forced into sexual relationships, abstinence is not an option, and lack of access to appropriate education and services can be life-threatening. At previous international conferences, governments including the United States agreed that adolescents have the right to sexual and reproductive health education, information and services. This right should be reaffirmed.

We regret that the United States is one of a very few countries that continues to use the death penalty for offenses committed before the age of eighteen. We welcome the fact that some US states are ending this practice, as have the vast majority of countries around the world. The international community has nearly universally condemned the use of capital punishment against juvenile offenders. This norm should be acknowledged in the outcome document.

The Outcome Document of this U. N. Special Session on children has the potential to have strong influence on government policies and children's lives worldwide. Like all other countries, the United States may register reservations on particular paragraphs of the outcome document. We implore the United States government to use the recognized U.N. process for reservations and not to further impede progress of nations on the Outcome Document.

The Child Rights Caucus encompasses hundreds of national and international non-governmental organizations from around the world that are committed to promoting and protecting the rights of children.

CALL FOR A G.7 GROUP AS MINISTER VOICES AID HOPES

A "G.7" should be formed by countries that have fulfilled the long-established, widely-ignored United Nations aid target for rich countries to give 0.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in aid, Norwegian International Development Minister Hilde Johnson said yesterday.

The five countries that have met the target are Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Johnson told a news conference that Ireland and Belgium had plans to hit the target, and that Norway planned to increase its development assistance to 1 percent of GDP, with a 15 percent share for education.

She called for children to be made the centre of development assistance policy-making and an end to "the donor circus" – as exemplified by Tanzania, which was required to make 1,000 reports to donors and whose finance ministry had to meet hundreds of delegations a year.

Though her suggestion for a Good Guys Group on the lines of the G7 group of industrialised countries might not be entirely serious, she said she believed the recent Monterrey conference marked a turning point in development finance.

She felt the preparations for Monterrey had been inadequate, and the prospects beforehand had looked poor. But both the European Union and the United States had made new pledges at the Mexico meeting – "it wasn't enough but it was a turning point because it ended the downward trend that has lasted for years. The tide is turning," she added, and even the countries that were not increasing their allocations felt they should do more.

Hilary Benn, UK parliamentary under secretary of state for international development, agreed that Monterrey had been positive. He told a briefing that there was now a broad understanding of the steps required to improve the situation of children, particularly since Monterrey. "UNGASS is a step along the way in the struggle to do something about international poverty," he said.

The UN Development Programme estimate is that about \$50 billion a year aid is needed to reach the main global poverty elimination goals - a doubling of existing commitments.

Indian parliamentarian Dr Najma Heptullah told a meeting organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNICEF that the world was engaged in a war for children and that "without the funds, whatever promises we make have no meaning."

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- * **Watered down language on rights and reproductive health**
- * **Superpower bullying**
- * **Lack of NGO access**

SPECIAL SESSION VERDICT: EXTREME DISAPPOINTMENT, IMMENSE SUCCESS

It ended not with a bang, but a whimper.

The whimpering came mainly from the biggest non-governmental coalition at the Special Session, the Child Rights Caucus, but it also came in surprisingly strong language from a number of governments after agreement was reached on the conference declaration late Friday evening.

For the Caucus, Jo Becker said the 100-group coalition was “extremely disappointed” with the downgrading of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the text, and accused governments of “squandering an opportunity” to build on the work of the last decade.

Describing the whole negotiating process as flawed, the Caucus said the United States and the European Union (EU) had negotiated the final compromise – with the EU stepping away from its commitments - and offered it to other governments on a take it or leave it basis. “The US has basically tried to hijack the document,” said Becker, and the EU had simply caved in.

After “fierce disputes over sexual and reproductive rights” said the Caucus, governments agreed only weak references to previous international conferences without spelling out the rights of adolescents to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education, information and services.

And the removal of one of the references to the aid target of 0.7 percent of gross domestic product “is a huge disappointment to all of us,” said Becker.

Several youth participants also voiced disappointment.

Said Tom Burke an under-18 delegate from the UK and member of the Caucus, “At the end of the Children’s Forum we explicitly told governments what *A World Fit For Us* would look like. The Outcome Document is a real disappointment. We spoke, but it feels like no-one really listened.”

Youth participant Bala Subramanya was even more pointed: “The Outcome Document contains no opinions of children.”

Razia Sultan Ismail Abbasi of the India Alliance for Child Rights blamed the US for being an obstacle to a productive agreement. She feared that by railroading the text to fit its own interests, the US would effectively erode other governments’ commitments to their children.

She said that South Asian governments, home to a majority of the world's children, had not performed well in meeting the targets of the 1990 Children's Summit and had a lot of explaining to do for their failure to hold fast in the current negotiations.

There was a sense of failure from the negotiations. In terms of the Convention, she said, "We've had a bad decade: we may be in for another."

Mary Purcell of the NGO Committee on UNICEF criticised the lack of access for NGOs during the negotiations. The general lack of contact with delegates over most of the negotiating period had become even more marked since April, when NGOs had found the doors tightly shut. The poor lines of communication with delegates was one of the reasons for the weakness of the document.

Mary Diaz of the NGO Committee on UNICEF picked up the theme when she addressed the meeting on Friday night. After noting the limited access offered to NGOs, she told governments they had to recognise the need for participation. In addition, the conference's failure to make its declaration a manifesto for the CRC sent the wrong message to children about governments' commitment to child rights.

The lack of transparency was also criticised by the Like-Minded Group (which includes Australia, Canada, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Slovakia and Switzerland). In the Friday night session, a spokesperson for the group said their efforts to maintain the openness of the negotiation had not been reciprocated. Better cooperation would have produced a better Outcome Document, he said.

Mexico was even more outspoken, saying it totally disagreed with the negotiating procedures. The Rio Group [of South American countries] had made an "immense effort" to secure a compromise, only to be unfairly accused of obstructing an agreement. Such conduct was unacceptable and threatened the entire process of multilateral negotiations.

Bolivia condemned the continued neglect of the reproductive rights of adolescents – an issue for many in Bolivia that threatened a women's right to life. While welcoming advances in the language on indigenous children and children's participation, Canada also registered dissatisfaction with the debate on sexual and reproductive health: "regrettable attempts" had been made to go back on language agreed at previous UN conferences; "the document falls significantly short" on the issue.

Against this mood of disappointment and in some cases anger, the US described the conference as "immensely successful" and the group of Some Developing Countries commented, "Today we have achieved a historical victory. We are presenting a big present to our children in the 21st century."

UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy also put the most positive gloss on the event. She listed the more than 60 presidents, vice-presidents, prime ministers and deputy prime ministers who had turned up to the Summit (as well as two queens, a king and princes); a strong showing by parliamentarians and religious leaders, the private sector and NGOs; the Secretary-General's end of decade year review; the Global Movement for Children; the national and regional action plans; the launching of several initiatives during the Summit, such as the micronutrient deficiency campaign; children's participation, including the first session of the General Assembly in which children were not only seen but heard; and "a very strong Outcome Document".

A WORLD FIT FOR CHILDREN

On 10 May, governments reached agreement and adopted a draft resolution, entitled '*A World Fit for Children*'.

Endorsement of 'A World Fit for Children' commits heads of states and governments to achieving a set of targets and benchmarks for children by 2010. The Outcome Document includes a declaration, a review of progress and lessons learned and a detailed plan of action.

There are four priorities for children in the coming decade.

- * Promoting healthy lives.
- * Providing quality education.
- * Protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence.
- * Combating HIV/AIDS.

The Plan of Action outlines how to create a world fit for children through specific goals, strategies and action; mobilising resources; and follow-up actions and monitoring. Goals and actions are linked to the achievement of the 2015 Millennium Development Goals.

In total there are 21 specific targets and benchmarks for child health, education and protection over the next decade.

I. PROMOTING HEALTHY LIVES

- (a) Reduction in the infant and under-five mortality rate by at least one third, in pursuit of the goal of reducing it by two thirds by 2015;
- (b) Reduction in the maternal mortality ratio by at least one third, in pursuit of the goal of reducing it by three quarters by 2015;
- (c) Reduction of child malnutrition among children under five years of age by at least one third, with special attention to children under two years of age, and reduction in the rate of low birth weight by at least one third of the current rate;
- (d) Reduction in the proportion of households without access to hygienic sanitation facilities and affordable and safe drinking water by at least one third;
- (e) Development and implementation of national early childhood development policies and programmes to ensure the enhancement of children's physical, social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive development;
- (f) Development and implementation of national health policies and programmes for adolescents, including goals and indicators, to promote their physical and mental health;
- (g) Access through the primary health-care system to reproductive health for all individuals of appropriate ages as soon as possible and no later than 2015.

II. PROVIDING QUALITY EDUCATION

- (a) Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, for girls and boys, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- (b) Reduce the number of primary school-age children who are out of school by 50 per cent and increase net primary school enrolment or participation in alternative, good quality primary education programmes to at least 90 per cent by 2010;
- (c) Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
- (d) Improve all aspects of the quality of education so that children and young people achieve recognized and measurable learning outcomes, especially in numeracy, literacy and essential life skills;

- (e) Ensure that the learning needs of all young people are met through access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;
- (f) Achieve a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women.

III. PROTECTING AGAINST ABUSE, EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

- (a) Protect children from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence;
- (b) Protect children from the impact of armed conflict and forced displacement, and ensure compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law; (pending)
- (c) Protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation, including paedophilia, trafficking, and abduction;
- (d) Take immediate and effective measures to eliminate the worst forms of child labour as defined in International Labour Organization Convention No. 182, and elaborate and implement strategies for the elimination of child labour that is contrary to accepted international standards;
- (e) Improve the plight of millions of children who live under especially difficult circumstances.

IV. COMBATING HIV/AIDS

- (a) By 2003, establish time-bound national targets to achieve the internationally agreed global prevention goal to reduce by 2005 HIV prevalence among young men and women aged 15 to 24 in the most affected countries by 25 per cent and by 25 per cent globally by 2010, and intensify efforts to achieve these targets as well as to challenge gender stereotypes and attitudes and gender inequalities in relation to HIV/AIDS, encouraging the active involvement of men and boys;
- (b) By 2005, reduce the proportion of infants infected with HIV by 20 per cent, and by 2010 reduce it by 50 per cent, by ensuring that 80 per cent of pregnant women accessing antenatal care have information, counselling and other HIV prevention services available to them, increasing the availability of and by providing access for HIV-infected women and babies to effective treatment to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV, as well as through effective interventions for HIV-infected women, including voluntary and confidential counselling and testing, access to treatment, especially anti-retroviral therapy and, where appropriate, breast milk substitutes and the provision of a continuum of care;
- (c) By 2003 develop and by 2005 implement national policies and strategies to build and strengthen governmental, family and community capacities to provide a supportive environment for orphans and girls and boys infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, including by providing appropriate counselling and psychosocial support, ensuring their enrolment in school and access to shelter, good nutrition, health and social services on an equal basis with other children, and protecting orphans and vulnerable children from all forms of abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, trafficking and loss of inheritance.

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Special Session Update

NGOs working together for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children

IT'S A STRANGE WAY TO MAKE A BETTER WORLD FOR CHILDREN

After more than two years of preparations and negotiations, delegates to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children were still sitting at midnight on the final day on 10 May 2002. There was much relief and self-congratulation when the meeting finally concluded a couple of hours later, but surely no one can consider it sensible to have to sit up half the final night in order to dot the i's and cross the t's – particularly as the overriding feeling of many of the children's organisations who monitored and tried to influence the protracted Summit process was one of disappointment.

* Disappointment at the confrontational and inflexible way the conference's main declaration was concluded, with the European Union suddenly falling into line with the United States and presenting their proposed text on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Mexico spoke for those delegates who were very angry with the way this final round of negotiations was forced through, with the country's delegate warning that such an uncompromising approach threatened the way multilateral negotiations were conducted at the UN, and stating that they hoped such behavior "will never happen again".

* Disappointment that a number of basic tenets were tossed out at the last moment – such as the way that - again in the closing minutes – key references to the Convention on the Rights of the Child were subtly doctored to avoid a categorical statement of the Convention's significance as the global standard for children and an essential basis for actions to protect and promote the rights of children.

* Disappointment at the way non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were kept at a distance from the negotiations. This represents a backward step for governments and their representatives at the UN, for which they should be ashamed. More than 1,700 NGO representatives from over 88 countries attended, and the opening up of the UN process to NGOs, particularly at and since the "Earth Summit", is one of the most important advances made by the UN in recent years: it has brought greater expertise to the UN, more accountability, more transparency: It has brought the institution a little closer to the concept of "we the people" and away from the idea of "we the governments, who know what's best and will fix it as we think best, in our own interests." In the words of Mary Diaz, co-chair of the NGO Steering Group: "Governments must recognise that civil society needs to be present and consulted. Citizens are asked to participate in building strong societies and holding their governments accountable. In order to do that we must have access to policy-making work and negotiations like this one."

* Disappointment, as usual, over the fudges and lack of firm commitment on financial resources and, inevitably, over the lack of an inspirational tone in conference outcomes – perhaps that is too much to hope from a giant committee and such a lengthy process of bargaining.

* Disappointment with the failure to get to grips with the issues of sexual and reproductive health for adolescents. Canada condemned the "regrettable attempts" to go back on text agreed at previous international conferences and in the closing session Bolivia made it clear that this was not just a theoretical issue – "it's about a young woman's right to life." The spread of HIV/AIDS has made this an even more critical issue than it was a decade ago. As Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS,

said, “The biggest crime is depriving young people of the right to know...We won’t meet the targets of the Summit unless AIDS is brought under control.”

This is not to suggest all was bad. Language on several issues, such as protective measures for children living in especially difficult circumstances, was stronger than the declaration approved by the 1990 World Summit for Children. The final outcome featured protection from abuse, exploitation and violence as one of the four priority areas, establishing five key goals in these areas and more than 47 actions and strategies.

The Summit also helped keep children on the agenda. Under-18s made some remarkable and historic contributions, some which must have touched all but the most authoritarian, hierarchical and paternalistic delegates. Few who listened to China when she addressed the General Assembly will ever forget her unbearable account of her experiences as a child soldier, both as perpetrator and victim – “It’s too painful. I don’t feel like any other human being.” Commented UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy, “For the first time in the history of the UN, they [children] are being heard.” Bellamy was a major beneficiary of the presence of children as national delegates, NGO representatives and participants in the Children’s Forum because she was able to use their repeated pleas to delegates for action rather than talk. Nevertheless, there is a danger that the participation of young people, achieved despite the doubts and opposition of a number of national delegates, will prove to have been a one-off success unless UNICEF takes responsibility for pressing for their inclusion in all relevant UN meetings.

It was Bellamy who in her final late-night words to the conference said simply, “Now is the time for action.” It was a youth delegate, Audrey, who noted, “We have 10-15 years to see if they [governments] have been listening.”

A WORLD FIT FOR CHILDREN

Available now! The unofficial advance unedited version of the outcome document, approved on Friday 10 May 2002 by the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children.

* In **English**, go to www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=1756 or www.unicef.org/specialsession/documentation/documents/WFFC-unedited-15may02.doc

The official version will be posted as soon as it is made available by the UN documentation services. This includes all official languages: English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Russian.

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