From 8-10 May 2002 in New York, the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children (UNGASS) brought together governments, UN agencies, hundreds of children, famous personalities and representatives of civil society to focus attention on children’s education, child soldiers, children with HIV/AIDS, the role of children in decision making and other issues affecting children. The Special Session, initially scheduled for September 2001, took place approximately 12 years after the groundbreaking World Summit for Children in 1990, which resulted in the World Declaration on Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action to achieve a set of precise, time-bound goals. UNGASS, which attracted approximately 70 Heads of State and Government, almost 1,500 NGO representatives and saw the integrated participation of child and youth delegates, while generating great enthusiasm to renew commitment to children. The Special Session was also the scene of contentious negotiations on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, reproductive health care services, juvenile justice and other issues.

Some NGO representatives said that the outcome document “A World Fit for Children,” which contains a political declaration, a review of progress and a plan of action, represented a “missed opportunity” to strengthen a rights-based agenda for children. Others, however, looked beyond the specific language of the document and focused on the progress made through the Global Movement for Children, the inclusion of 21 goals and targets in the outcome document that mirror the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the dynamic participation of children in the event itself. In her closing address, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Carol Bellamy remarked, “We have had three days of extraordinary meetings. This has been the first session of the General Assembly where children were not only seen, they were heard.” She continued, “They captured our hearts, they captured our minds. They inspired us with their energy and their enthusiasm. They reminded us of our past promises and they asked for action now.”

Forum delegates drafted an official statement that was later delivered to the opening plenary in the General Assembly by children—a first for the UN body. In it, the delegates described a world that they said was “fit for children:”

- We see respect for the rights of the child;
- We see an end to exploitation, abuse and violence;
- We see an end to war;
- We see the provision of health care;
- We see the eradication of HIV/AIDS;
- We see the protection of the environment;
- We see an end to the vicious cycle of poverty;
- We see the provision of education; and
- We see the active participation of children.

The Forum message identified concrete actions including: governments and adults having a real and effective commitment to the principle of children’s rights and applying the Convention on the Rights of the Child to all children; laws that protect children from exploitation and abuse; disarmament, elimination of the arms trade and an end to the use of child soldiers; and educational systems that include HIV/AIDS prevention programmes.

“The Forum involved a variety of workshops, plenary sessions and closed events, and provided an opportunity for child participants to share recommendations that emerged from meetings of the preparatory committee (PrepCom) and regional PrepComs. It also served to further explore the issues of the draft outcome document, and children’s role in its implementation, as well as to prepare for the Special Session itself. Working from a child-friendly version of “A World Fit for Children” prepared by Save the Children, youth delegates worked together to identify constructive means to influence their governments, UN agencies, NGOs and other decision makers on programmes designed to benefit children.

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be a formidable obstacle to resolution. The core of contentious issues revolved around the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), defining “family,” reproductive health services, access to sex education, the death penalty for under-18s, and the commitment of financial resources. As has been the case in recent years in negotiations on issues of social development (e.g. Beijing +5, held in New York in 2000 and WSSD+5, held in Genoa in 2005), the CRC, which remains one of the few international instruments relevant for children, is also still deadlocked over vital issues such as reproductive health and juvenile justice. During these negotiations, the US and some Islamic countries like Iran and Sudan often took similar positions to the US in areas including the definition of “family” and issues such as reproductive health and sex education. The Rio Group, representing most Latin American countries, the European Union (EU), and the US were the other dominant negotiating partners.

Final negotiations largely took place in an “informal informal” format at the UNICEF House involving the principal negotiating groups and the facilitator, Ambassador Hanns Schumacher (Germany).

According to Ambassador Schumacher the informal informal format, which excluded the presence of NGO representatives and parts of the UN system, was used because “governments needed to be alone.” He said negotiations otherwise would have been drawn out with governments hesitating to reveal final positions in front of NGO’s. On the first two days of UNGASS, governments were expected to come into “informal” negotiations and finish the outcome document. However, Ambassador Schumacher instead offered briefings on the status of negotiations for delegations not involved in the talks and confessed to them that the “interested parties” were still deadlocked over vital issues such as reproductive health services and juvenile justice and that “informals” would be useless. He urged the parties to work out positions on their own and then approach him when they were in a position to compromise. Ambassador Schumacher mentioned on a couple of occasions in his briefings that some of the negotiators involved were from capitals and did not fully appreciate the process of arriving at consensus positions.

**Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**

Currently, the US and Somalia are the only two countries that have not ratified the CRC. The CRC, which is recognized as a nearly universally accepted convention and came into force in 1990, is seen by many governments and children’s advocates as the basis for a “rights-based” approach to child protection. Many governments and NGOs were hoping to have this reflected in the outcome document despite US opposition.

The US has not ratified the CRC largely due to domestic political opposition based on what is perceived as the CRC’s intent and potential impact on US legislators. Opponents have argued that the CRC potentially interferes with the parent-child relationship and the authority of parents as well as the authority of state and national legislators to determine how children are taught and raised. During these negotiations the EU, the Rio Group and LMG wanted the CRC held up as the principle framework for the advancement of children. In the end, the reference was “the CRC and its Optional Protocols contain a comprehensive set of international legal standards for the protection and wellbeing of children.” Other international instruments relevant for children are also acknowledged. The general reference was “calls upon the governments of all States, in particular States in which the death penalty has not been abolished, to comply with the obligations they have assumed under relevant provisions of international human rights instruments...” Some speculated that in order to have this reference remain, the EU agreed to weaken the language on reproductive health.

**Family**

Defining the term “family” became a controversial exercise during negotiations. The US, along with some Latin American countries including Argentina and Nicaragua, and some developing countries, favoured an interpretation of the family based on a union between a man and a woman, while acknowledging single-parent households and other arrangements built around the initial union. However, the EU, the Rio Group and LMG favoured a more general definition that could include same-sex unions. The final language refers to the family as the basic unit of society and calls for its strengthening while also acknowledging that “in different cultural, social and political systems, various forms of the family exist.” In the concluding plenary, the US, Argentina, and Nicaragua said that they understood “various forms of the family” to mean the union of a man and a woman, single-parent families and extended families.

**Juvenile Justice**

The EU and the US have well known differences on the issue of the death penalty, particularly as it relates to those below the age of 18. The EU sought to have a specific reference in the text to the prohibition of the death penalty for juveniles knowing fully that the US countries like Iran would be unwilling to accept such language, as the punishment is legal in their countries.

The final text refers to the protection of children from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and “calls upon the governments of all States, in particular States in which the death penalty has not been abolished, to comply with the obligations they have assumed under relevant provisions of international human rights instruments...” Some speculated that in order to have this reference remain, the EU agreed to weaken the language on reproductive health.

**Reproductive Health**

One of the most difficult negotiating items on the outcome document was how to deal with reproductive health services and abortion. Some representatives of civil society had argued that the US was trying to roll back advances made during other conferences such as the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (China) in 1995, and the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo (Egypt) in 1994 and their five-year reviews on these issues, which framed them as issues of empowerment for women and adolescents and not merely as issues of medical standards.

Controversy centred on the reference to “ensuring that all individuals of appropriate age, especially women and adolescent girls, have affordable and universally accessible health care, including sexual and reproductive health, in conformity with the outcomes of recent UN conferences and summits.” During the negotiations, the US and some Islamic countries insisted on a specific reference stating that sexual and reproductive health care did not refer to abortion. In the end, there was no need for this reference as the paragraph was deleted. The final document refers to “addressing effectively, for all individuals of appropriate age, the promotion of their healthy lives, including their reproductive and sexual health, consistent with the commitments and outcomes of recent UN conferences and summits.”

**Financial Resources**

Recently at the International Conference on Financing for Development (ICFFD), held in Monterrey (Mexico, see NGLS Roundup 91) governments agreed to “breakthrough” language on official development assistance (ODA) that called for developed countries that have not reached the 0.7% of
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.

In order to achieve these goals and targets, governments agreed to take into account the best interests of the child, consistent with national laws, religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people, and in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedoms, as they carried out a list of strategies and actions, including: protecting, promoting and supporting exclusive breastfeeding of infants for six months; and addressing disparities in access to safe and healthy start in life for all children by pursuing the millennium development goals in such areas as infant and maternal mortality, gender equality in education and school enrolment. These goals will form a basis on which unicef, governments and civil society groups will carry out their follow-up work and which will be mutually reinforcing of other un system efforts to promote achievement of the millennium targets.

Promoting Healthy Lives
Governments committed themselves to break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and poor health by providing a safe and healthy start in life for all children by pursuing the following goals:

a) Reduction in the infant and under-five mortality rate by at least one-third during the course of this decade (2000-2010), 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 during the course of this decade (2000-2010), 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 during the course of this decade (2000-2010), 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; and
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.

In order to achieve these goals and targets, governments agreed to take into account the best interests of the child, consistent with national laws, religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people, and in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedoms, as they carried out a list of strategies and actions, including: protecting, promoting and supporting exclusive breastfeeding of infants for six months; and addressing disparities in access to social services for indigenous and minority children.

Providing Quality Education
Governments recognized education as a human right and a key factor in reducing poverty and child labour and in promoting democracy, peace, tolerance and development. In so doing they agreed to achieve the following six targets:

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-aged children who are out of school by 50% and increase net primary school enrolment or participation in alternative, good quality primary education programmes to at least 90% 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; and
f) Achieve a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women.

In pursuit of these targets, governments committed to implement strategies and actions that include: enhancing the status, morale, training and professionalism of teachers; developing strategies to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on education systems; and ensuring that indigenous and minority children have equal access to quality education.

Protecting against Abuse, Exploitation and Violence
Governments agreed that children have the right to be protected from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence and that societies must eliminate all forms of violence against children. They therefore resolved to:

a) Protect children from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence;
b) Protect children from the impact of armed conflict and ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law;
c) Protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation including pedophilia, 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

SAY “YES” TO CHILDREN
Ninety-four million signatures in support of the global movement for children were presented to Nelson Mandela during the special session representing the number of people around the world who had “said yes to children.”

The campaign, which was kicked off in 2001 by Mr. Mandela and Graça Machel, is a collective effort of individuals, NGOs, children, child advocates, trade unions, local authorities, political organizations, foundations, famous personalities and other actors of civil society involved in the struggle for children’s rights.

The campaign is built around ten imperatives that it asks supporters to take actions on and commit to:

- Leave No Child Out
- Put Children First
- Care for Every Child
- Fight HIV/AIDS
- Stop Harassing and Exploiting Children
- Listen to Children
- Educate Every Child
- Protect Children from War
- Protect the Earth for Children
- Fight Poverty

To “Say Yes to Children” with Vanessa Redgrave, the Sesame Street character “Elmo,” Mikhail Gorbachev, and Queen Rania, among others, go to (www.unicef.org/say_yes)
and implement strategies for the elimination of child labour that is contrary to accepted international standards; and

e) Improve the plight of millions of children who live under especially difficult circumstances.

Some of the strategies outlined to achieve these goals included:

- Adopting special measures to eliminate discrimination against children on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status; ending impunity for all crimes against children; and ending harmful traditional or customary practices, such as early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

**SC HOLDS MEETING ON CHILD SOLDIERS AND ARMED CONFLICT**

In a meeting on 7 May 2002, the Security Council heard testimonies of youth delegates focusing on their experiences in armed conflict. One of the delegates, sixteen-year-old Wilmot of Liberia described how 11 years ago he and his mother were forced to flee from their home because of the civil war. "I was too young at the time to really understand what was happening," he said. "I heard the sound of guns. I saw people running. I saw people shooting. I saw people killing. I saw people dying. People as young as I were dying."

Following the testimonies of the youth delegates—only the second time in history the Security Council has been addressed by youth—the Council adopted a Presidential Statement on Children and Armed Conflict, in which the Council expressed its commitment to the protection of children affected by armed conflict as an essential component of its work to promote and maintain international peace and security.

The Council also heard from several experts on children and armed conflict including Olara Otunnu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, who said that when adults waged war, children paid the highest price. "Children are killed and maimed, made orphans and refugees, traumatized and abused, denied education, malnourished, and exploited as child soldiers," Mr. Otunnu said. He went on to ask the Security Council to ensure that the protection and wellbeing of children systematically become part of negotiations to end conflict and the ensuing peace accords.

Mr. Otunnu also promoted the participation of children themselves in peacekeeping processes saying that they needed to be an important component of efforts on the ground in such areas as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Graca Machel, former Independent Expert of the Secretary-General on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, and author of the recent book *Impact of War on Children*, said it was a measure of progress made in moving children to the centre of the security agenda that such a meeting in which children could address the Security Council was being held, and urged that it be a regular occurrence. Ms. Machel highlighted areas of progress made since her appointment in 1996 that included Security Council resolutions promoting the protection of children and women in armed conflict, introduction of the International Convention on Landmines, strengthening of international frameworks, such as the Optional Protocol to the International Convention on Children, and the appointment of the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

While pointing out that implementation of Security Council resolutions was too slow, Ms. Machel urged the Council to use all of its powers to strengthen related measures. "Every day that a child lives in fear, pain or danger of violence of war is another day where we have not done enough," she said.

**ROUNDTABLES**

In order to generate high-level in-depth discussions during the Special Session, three closed session roundtables were organized involving a number of Heads of State and Government, other government representatives, child delegates, and representatives of UN system agencies and bodies. Each of the roundtables focused their discussions on the theme "Renewal of commitment and future actions for children in the next decade."

The first roundtable, chaired by Mongolian Prime Minister Nambar Enkhbayar and President of Romania Ion Iliescu, took up the issue of education and its centrality in overcoming problems of poverty and underdevelopment. A few of the child delegates stressed the importance of education particularly for vulnerable groups, girls and indigenous children.

Chaired by Presidents Tarja Halonen (Finland) and Vicente Fox (Mexico), the second roundtable discussed the importance of listening to children and young people in a true intergenerational dialogue. Several child delegates spoke of their own histories of violence and urged those present to combat exploitation, abuse, and trafficking of children. They said it was critical for children and young people to have real participation in decision making, especially refugee children, girls and indigenous children. One questioned whether or not the involvement of children had been taken seriously in the outcome document.

The third roundtable, chaired by Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Duba, and President of Zambia Levy Mwanawasa, had as its primary theme the question of resources and their central role in achieving the goals of a "World Fit for Children." The roundtable heard many calls for meeting the international ODA target and for increasing resources for programmes benefiting children and women. Some governments raised the issue of good governance and investment in people, while others suggested that aid for children should not be subjected to conditionality. There were also calls for fairer trading systems and more open markets.

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Full coverage of the Special Session is available at website (www.unicef.org/specialsession).