

UNICEF documents failure to alleviate child poverty and disease

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The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently released its report entitled *The State of the World's Children 2002*, detailing the terrible predicament facing millions of children more than a decade after the organisation convened its World Summit for Children in 1990.

The summit took place amid the triumphalism that accompanied the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Socialism was dead, the market was all conquering and a new era of peace and prosperity was dawning, according to the ideologues of capitalism.

As the report notes: "The Cold War was over and there was widespread expectation that money that had been spent on arms could now be devoted to human development in a 'peace dividend'". The assembled world leaders pledged themselves to an action plan with "time-tied, concrete goals" and piously declared: "The well-being of children requires political action at the highest level."

The recent UNICEF report is an open admission of failure. While some modest gains were made, none of the limited goals announced at the summit have been met. For the most part, the situation confronting children in so-called developing countries is just as bad as a decade ago.

Worldwide, 11 million children die each year from diseases such as diarrhea, polio, measles and tetanus, which are all preventable given clean water to drink, a proper diet, shelter and immunisation. While the figure is an improvement over 1990 when 14 million children died, it stands as a stark reminder that none of the underlying problems have been resolved.

The seven main goals established at the 1990 summit were: to reduce child mortality rates by 33 percent, lower the maternal mortality rate by 50 percent, cut child malnutrition rates in half, assure safe drinking water and sanitation for all, deliver basic education for every child, and improve protection of children. None of these were achieved.

* Over the decade, the infant and under-five mortality rate fell by only 14 percent from 94 to 81 per 1,000 live births. Moreover, as the report explained, "serious disparities

remain within countries; by income level, urban vs rural, and among minority groups". In sub-Saharan Africa, there was virtually no change. The improvements in the immunisation rates in the 1980s "stalled" and over a quarter of the world's children are not immunised.

* On maternal mortality rates, the report frankly admits: "countries have made no discernable progress." About 515,000 women die each year as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. In South Asia, 71 percent of births go unattended and in sub-Saharan Africa, 63 percent. The lifetime chance of women dying in pregnancy or childbirth in industrialised countries is one in 4,085. In the least developed countries, it is one in 16 and, in sub-Saharan Africa, one in 13.

* In "developing" countries, there has been only a small worldwide improvement in malnutrition and poverty figures. Some 600 million children live in poverty. Thirty-two percent of the world's children had stunted growth between 1995 and 2000. The fall in the malnutrition rate in Asia was only 7 percent. In sub-Saharan Africa the number of malnourished children increased.

* Access to sanitation and clean water has only risen marginally. About 1.1 billion people still lack access to safe water. 2.4 billion people do not have access to adequate sanitation.

* School attendance increased slightly from 78 to 82 percent. The report commented: "While net primary enrolment is increasing at a higher rate than population growth, there are still more than 100 million children without access to basic education, 60 million of them girls." These are overwhelmingly working children, children affected by disability, by HIV/AIDS or conflict, children from poor families, ethnic minorities or living in rural and remote areas.

In the case of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union where the market was supposedly going to work a miracle, the UNICEF report points to a social reversal over the past decade. In the Russian Federation 27,000 children under five die each year from preventable diseases. Some of the causes of death, such as diarrhea, are as easy to prevent as

supplying rehydration tablets, costing only 26 cents.

Real gross domestic product in the countries which made up the former Soviet Union declined by about 45 percent between 1990 and 1998. According to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report “The Social Crisis in Russia,” spending on social programs declined at the same rate. Unemployment stood at 12 percent in 2000.

The UNICEF report comments: “Countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia have seen a virtual collapse of public provision of pre-school education.” And further on: “Young people, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, face massive unemployment and often displacement.”

UNICEF also notes the failure of the developed countries to “to show the requisite global leadership in the field of HIV/AIDS.... Governments of the industrialised countries paid narrow attention to their own disease statistics and turned a blind eye to the tragedy unfolding in the developing countries.”

The most severe crisis is to be found in sub-Sahara Africa where the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is 8.6 percent, compared to 1.1 percent worldwide. In Haiti an estimated 210,000 adults and children contracted HIV in 2000 and the disease has orphaned 74,000 children. In the US, 31,000 children under five died in 2000, a figure comparable to some developing countries.

HIV/AIDS is not an inevitable disaster but is the product of definite social conditions. As the report explains: “Any infection thrives in conditions of poverty, malnutrition and unsafe water: It is as true of HIV/AIDS as it is of tuberculosis and measles.” The lack of the basic necessities of life as well as adequate medical programs for treatment and prevention has led to the current epidemic in areas like sub-Saharan Africa.

Having painted a bleak picture of the situation facing millions of children, UNICEF has little to offer in the way of solutions. The report cites a number of corporations that have made charitable donations. “There is ample room for demonstrating that corporations are capable of this kind of enlightened and ethical leadership in the world’s fight against HIV/AIDS,” it declares.

The report explains that Coca-Cola recently announced it would use its distribution network to ship condoms, testing kits and literature to remote clinics. Coca-Cola is one of several companies on the Global Business Council on HIV/AIDS. Others are AOL Time Warner, MAC cosmetics and Unilever.

“Some private companies have shown a different kind of leadership in finding a way in which hi-tech, cutting edge commerce can serve the needs of the poorest. Finnish mobile-

phone giant Nokia, for example, has launched child-orientated social initiatives in many countries, including supporting the Little Master newspaper in China, developing the business skills of South African youth and participating in a mentoring program in Germany,” the report notes.

The glaring disparity between the size of the donations and the extent of the social crisis confronting children is simply passed over without comment. The involvement of these companies was never more than a band-aid, aimed more at improving the corporate image than alleviating the suffering of children.

The UNICEF report forcefully makes the point that the goals set for the 1990s were completely realisable. “In the same decade humanity showed its enormous ingenuity and technological capacity over and over again.” It pointed to the huge strides taken in understanding human genetic make-up, the expansion of the Internet and the construction of space projects such as the Hubble Space Telescope.

“The resources and technological know-how are there,” the report concludes. But then the authors are at a loss to explain the obvious and abject failure of the grand plan announced in 1990. Rather pathetically, the report simply declares: “That this wealth and these skills have not been fully harnessed to deliver a world fit for children is, then, a result of misguided leadership and a dereliction of duty.”

But why did the “dereliction of duty” occur? It is a pertinent question given that the UNICEF report is to set the stage for another international conference next month where the results of the past decade and plans for the next decade are to be discussed. It is possible to predict in advance that the official pronouncements of this talkfest will be just as righteous and rosy as the last—and just as worthless.

The report is not just an indictment of the leaders of world capitalism over the past 12 years but of a social system that places profit before human need.



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