

Closing Statement
**“Caring For Young Children:
Perspectives on Change for the Future”**

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Priorities and Challenges in the 21st Century**
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this Conference which has addressed so many issues of vital importance to young children.

It is banality to say everything is changing. “It’s a changing world...etc”. Even the weather is changing.

Yet, as with the weather-as someone said, “Everybody talks about it - but nobody does anything about it”

So, often enough, it is with change. Yet learning to deal with change is increasingly what life is about. Learning to manage the forces, which shape our lives, in the midst of this change, is what development is about. Individual development and national development are intimately connected.

What constitutes the nature of the change in store for our children in the 21st century? We already have to deal with a world in which many powerful influences on day-to-day living - the choice of consumer products, the possibilities of work, the offerings of mass communication and entertainment - come from far away and are devised without our participation. The future is likely to enormously increase this sense of alienation and uncertainty.

Two courses are open to us in dealing with this. One is to decentralize power and authority to institutions, governmental and otherwise, closer to where people actually live.

The other already is taking place. An enormous increase in the need for information to help individuals understand and anticipate important changes in their personal and working lives. This phenomenon - so far at least - is threatening to open another gulf between the haves and the have-nots, dividing us into the information-rich and the information-poor.

The globalized economy lives on information. Compared to the information access of the average schoolchild today, in Thailand certainly, the actors in the globalized economy are already unimaginably “information-rich”, and the gap is widening!

Such a gulf makes even more pivotal the challenge of decentralizing power and, consequently, of access to information. Taking part in decision making and taking responsibility for action are the most important learning experiences any of us can have. They give us the confidence to go on to other challenges. This is real development - and the best way we can care for the children of the 21st century is to foster and promote this development.

I don't need to tell you all the physical and psycho-social factors - which bear on that process of growth in the young child and which require a holistic approach to allow the child to become capable of handling complex emotions and interactions with others and with the world around them.

I stress the need for a holistic approach to solutions, especially in public policy. Lack of this approach in public policy has led to disparities in access to social services-formal and non - formal education, proper health care and adequate nutrition - as well as to forms of abuse and exploitation which make one wonder sometimes about man's claims to superiority over the animal kingdom.

The more common consequence of the failure of public policy, and therefore the more powerful in its aggregate effect, is the separation of children from parents. Often not having enough secure family environment, because economic pressures have compelled fathers and mothers to migrate to cities and towns to seek work.

Of course the economic and social marginalisation of many children thus thrown upon their own resources, to live by their wits at a frighteningly young age, their options and choices drastically narrowed, their futures foreclosed - even should they happen to escape outright abuse and gross exploitation by others - is tragically wasteful and dangerous.

For mainstream economics, these human costs are “externalities”, regrettable but inevitable casualties of the drive for national competitiveness. This must be why economics is called “the dismal science”.

To me such a perspective seems not only morally bankrupt but extremely shortsighted. Human costs mean social costs and these have a way of becoming enormously expensive. Just because we have not worked out how to count them does not make them less costly.

Indeed, the public policy challenge of the holistic approach to child development begins with this lack of measurement. Until we reckon the cost of all these wasted young lives, fore-shortened possibilities and unrealized potential, the political commitment will remain uncertain and the necessary financial investment highly unlikely to say the least.

Children deserve better! Indeed they have a legal right to something better. Thailand, like some 180-plus countries around the world including every one in this region, acknowledges that fact through accession to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I signed the articles of accession on behalf of Thailand in 1992.

The Convention is a binding international instrument setting the norms for children's survival, development, protection and participation.

Survival rights focus on needs basic to existence, including the provision of health care and nutrition. Development rights, are about children reaching their potential. These include the right to education, leisure, freedom of thought and culture.

Protection rights of course refer to protection against such things as abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Participation rights, include the child's right of access to information and to a role in decision-making appropriate to their competence in matters which concern them.

As I have already noted, access to information and playing an adequate role in decision making is arguably one of the most important (and effective) ways we learn. The key to development really.

Children should have as much preparation for participation as possible, through actual experience. As you all know, learning begins at birth. Young children can, and do, participate as much as they jolly well can. We parents try to draw the line and maybe we should be more ready to bring children in on appropriate levels of decision making in these early years.

In any case when participation is systematically denied and judgement is never exercised, one of two things happens - either the analytical thinking and capacity for making judgements tends to atrophy, or resentment begins to grow. Many problems of adolescence - and who knows what else in adulthood - have their origins in these tensions.

As with the individual, so with the nation. A people need experience of participation to fully exploit its potential to learn and to develop.

It is the job of public policy and national leadership to provide an environment and a stimulus for this development. Care and development of the child is a logical place to start.

The 21st century will demand new abilities of our citizens in this part of the world-the ability to learn throughout life, to analyse and make informed judgements, to reason and to anticipate, to work harmoniously in groups and to collaborate through sharing knowledge, to negotiate and to resolve conflict without recourse to the fight-or-flight reaction.

These capacities, the experts tell us, represent where the world is heading. Our corporations are already struggling to develop such capacities, to start thinking of workers as assets rather than costs.

Is it too much to expect that the “dismal” economics which guide our public policy considerations could begin to learn the same lessons? Start to think about the young child, and the nurturing family and community environment that the child needs, as assets rather than “externalities”.

Let us not make the same mistakes as were made by the industrialized world a century and a half ago...and reap the same bitter harvest of alienation and anti-social behaviour, of large scale unrest and discontent, of prisons full and neighborhoods aflame.

I believe the subject of this Conference to be crucial to avoiding a repetition of this history. I hope our national leadership around this region are paying attention because, to paraphrase an American saying, you can ignore some of the people some of the time but you can't ignore most of the people most of the time.

Children are people too and the message of this Conference is that not only are you never too old to learn but that public policy has to recognize that you are never too young either - and that it's none too soon to begin acting on the premise.