

PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHILDREN

*Address by
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Madam (or Mr) Chairperson,
UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am greatly honoured to be with you here today in Siem Reap for the 7th East Asia and Pacific Ministerial Consultation on Children. I thank Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen, the Royal Government of Cambodia and UNICEF for the excellent work they have done in organizing and preparing for this most important event. Of course, this is not the first of these Ministerial Consultations I have addressed and participated in. I am thus well aware of the significance of this, the only gathering at this level devoted exclusively to advancing the rights of children in our region.

I will address today the fundamental importance of partnerships for children, a subject that relates to much of the work I have done over the years in both the public and private sectors, and as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, a position I have been honoured to hold for the last nine years.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we all know too well, the biggest natural calamity to hit our region in recent times was the Indian Ocean Tsunami. It had absolutely devastating effects on a number of countries, most notably Aceh and North Sumatra provinces in Indonesia, many parts of Sri Lanka and Maldives, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Tamil Nadu State in India, parts of southern Myanmar and western Malaysia and, in my own country, Phang-Nga, Phuket and some of the southern provinces of Thailand. It even struck countries as far away as the Seychelles, Somalia and Kenya.

Media attention focused on the scale of the disaster with large pictures of the effects of extremely large waves. It drew our attention to the particular vulnerability of children, whether in the scale of death among these fragile young people or in the potential dangers of their succumbing to deadly diseases, such as cholera, malaria or measles, all of which we thankfully avoided. It highlighted the unfortunate potential of criminal elements in our countries to take advantage of unaccompanied children to traffic them for in-country or inter-country adoption or for sexual exploitation, again largely avoided thanks to a timely alert. It underlined the trauma faced by affected children, especially since they were deprived of the normalcy of education with the destruction of so many schools and the deaths of their teachers. This is a disaster we can not, should never forget.

I subscribe to all these observations. However, I draw a number of other lessons from this unprecedented disaster.

Firstly, I salute the heroic efforts of the governments and people of the affected countries. They have truly led the response to the Tsunami from immediate relief to planning for longer

term recovery. This includes the great contribution made by local non-governmental organizations, a matter to which I shall return later in may address. We should all be proud of our fellow Asians in their demonstration of incredible resilience. I salute too the very positive contributions made by our friends from around the world, from the various external armed forces that immediately placed their substantial assets and human resources at our disposal, from international NGOs that came to our assistance through material and technical aid.

I would make special mention of the United Nations, an institution that is essential to our lives in an international and interdependent world. I have recently served as Chair of a Group of Eminent Persons looking into how the UN could further improve in its relevance and effectiveness. The UN played its true role in working with governments to provide leadership and coordination in the relief effort, with our own UNICEF doing so especially in the areas of education, water and sanitation, and child protection. The UN still has much to contribute as we enter the phase of recovery and reconstruction.

Secondly, like you, I was overwhelmed by the incredible outpouring of public and official sympathy and support for the victims of the Tsunami. Governments around the world have pledged billions of dollars for both relief and recovery, including contributions from those not normally considered as donors, from China to Lao PDR.

Even more impressive though were the enormous gifts given selflessly by ordinary people. We know about the massive public fundraising in Europe, North America, Japan and Australasia, but it doesn't end there. Millions of Thai and Indonesian citizens made their own private donations. Mongolians and Vietnamese for perhaps the first time came forward to make personal contributions to causes outside their own countries. Many of these donations came to UNICEF for the benefit of children. As of today, UNICEF's ample resources to respond to the needs and rights of children in Tsunami affected areas come one-third from government sources but two-thirds from non-governmental sources, mostly public donations.

Thirdly, notwithstanding the devastating and heart-wrenching effects of the tsunami, I can't forget the other very grave problems faced by our region and our world. I'm especially concerned that the latest disaster will cause us to forget these other concerns. I have spent much of my professional and private life trying, often very successfully, to get governments and people to take seriously the threat of HIV and AIDS. In the long term AIDS will kill far more people than any natural disaster, however big. We must not forget that. We must not neglect that.

Furthermore, within the countries themselves affected by the Tsunami, there are other areas where children suffer almost equal deprivation. In Indonesia, it is actually the easternmost provinces that are the most deprived day in and day out. In Thailand, we have made such enormous strides in national development that many, including myself, see us as a potential future donor country. Yet we still have many problems to resolve for vulnerable families in the north and east, as well as in the far south of our country. We must not forget that. We must not neglect that.

And then there are innumerable children and others ravaged by unnecessary and resolvable conflicts around the world, for example, in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Palestine and, yes, in our own region in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, and suffering the consequences of past conflicts in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and here in Cambodia. We must not forget that. We must not neglect that.

And further, are we to forget and neglect our duty to meet the needs and rights of children, who die from malnutrition and preventable infections, or women who die in childbirth, or girls

who are denied their right to education? Are we now to forget and neglect our commitments to the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals?

What then do we take forward from this experience that is of wider significance? I would argue that we can and must do more for children in both Tsunami affected areas and in other domains and places. Our challenge now is to continue to promote and facilitate international solidarity with the Tsunami victims and turn this into concrete support for the world's other emergencies, and beyond that for the wider problems and opportunities we have identified in the Millennium agenda. This calls for new ways of doing business, for new kinds of partnership among governments, civil society and the corporate world, which has also played its part in financing Tsunami relief and recovery.

With UNICEF in Thailand, we have already shown how partnerships with the corporate sector and the general public can produce more resources for children. More than half of all of UNICEF's country programme of cooperation in Thailand is funded from in-country donations. My dream is to make this generosity available to programmes for children in neighbouring countries and for Thailand to complete the transition from a net recipient to a net donor nation.

Madam (or Mr) Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates:

We are here today in a Ministerial Consultation. By definition, that means the primary partners are governments of East Asia and the Pacific. We have, however, rightly involved civil society, in the form of national and international non-governmental organizations, in these Ministerial Consultations over a number of years now. There is, of course, a basic principle at play here. Governments are accountable to the people. Civil society organizations are an expression of popular engagement in public life.

Civil society organizations have proven particularly important and effective in advancing the rights and well-being of children, and the NGOs present here are all dedicated to that very cause. Governments, of course, have the best interests of children at heart, and they are the primary duty bearers for the fulfillment of children's rights. However, governments are also faced with hard decisions, as I am very well aware from my time as Head of Government in Thailand. Often it is easier to take the most pragmatic way out, to take decisions that make practical sense from a macro-economic or national security perspective, with unintended negative consequences for the poor or for children. Over-rapid privatization of social services is one example. Poorly planned slum clearance may be another. Yet a third would be the abrupt removal of agricultural or other subsidies. There are more.

Who is there to remind us of these unintended consequences, but the NGOs? It may be unpleasant to have groups constantly reminding those of us now, or in the past, in government, but we have to recognize that we don't always get it right. If we truly believe in democratic principles, we should indeed embrace this difference of opinion, not necessarily always acting in ways that some civil society organizations would urge us, but at least listening openly and intently. These differences of opinion are indeed a strength in our East Asian and Pacific societies, and something it is well worth encouraging.

Civil society organizations are truly vital partners in all processes of development and humanitarian response. In the latter domain, we have seen how effective they have been in responding to the Asian Tsunami disaster. I also recognized their key value when, as Prime Minister of Thailand, along with then Minister Meechai Viravaidya, I launched the campaign to control the spread of HIV/AIDS in my own country. Government had to provide policy and leadership. It had a duty to set the context within which society as a whole could tackle what I saw as our gravest problem at the time, one that has now diminished in its present gravity but is still a serious danger. Government had to ensure that all of its agencies were taking

the necessary measures to promote preventive action and provide care and support for those living with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

However, we would never have achieved the success we did without our partnership with local, national and international civil society organizations. It was largely they who enabled us to reach out to the populations most at risk – commercial sex workers and intravenous drug users – to provide them with the essential means to prevent HIV transmission both among themselves and to the general population. I know there are similar experiences here in Cambodia, one of the other rare countries of the world to act with success to reduce the spread of our world's current greatest scourge, about which we can never afford to be complacent.

Governments can only gain in implementing their programmes by opening and strengthening partnerships with NGOs. We have to remember though that NGOs are not mere implementing agencies. They must also be engaged in the formulation of the policies and programmes they help to implement. They are generally closer to the people than are the politicians and bureaucrats – all the more reason to listen to them as we plan our programmes for development and poverty reduction. I hope that international organizations, such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and, yes, UNICEF also take this lesson to heart.

My last point on civil society partnership is one that is sometimes more contentious, but I shall raise it anyway. Civil society organizations are vital to hold governments to account. Governments derive their authority from the people, and that authority is truly considerable. On their behalf, governments take on responsibilities for the respect, protection and fulfillment of human rights, including those of children.

Among the countries represented here today, all have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, though not all its two optional protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. I would encourage you all seriously to consider extending your governments' ratification to those two optional protocols. An important part of governments' obligations under the CRC is to report periodically to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and we are privileged to have with us here the Chair of that Committee, Jaap Doek. Painful though that process may sometimes be, the rules of the game also allow civil society organizations to comment on these reports at the Committee's pre-sessionals. If the civil society organizations are not satisfied with the State Party report, they also have the right to present shadow reports, which the Committee is obliged to consider.

Again I would put it to you that NGOs and other civil society organizations are closer to the real lives and opinions of poor families and children than are politicians and bureaucrats. It's actually not a weakness but a strength to have this degree of scrutiny on the actions and reporting of governments. If we look at the Constitutions of most of our countries, we shall see that this is also consistent with their basic tenets, and they are the basic law of our countries.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

At the World Economic Congress in Davos in 1999, Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, proposing a Global Compact, said: *"The United Nations once dealt only with governments. By now we know that peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving governments, international organizations, the business community and civil society. In today's world we are all dependent on each other."* I should now like to turn from considerations regarding partnership with civil society to that with the private or corporate sector.

By the end of the last century our world had changed beyond all recognition, and it continues to change. Governments do still exercise ultimate authority, but they are no longer the principal players in the world economy, not even in the economies of most countries. In the Asian crisis of 1997 we saw this with great pain to our people, as livelihoods disappeared almost overnight through the effect of currency trading entirely out of the hands of those controlling the levers of State. Large multinational corporations and funds can make or break national economies. Smaller enterprises can provide essential employment for poor parents or be the principal exploiters of the labour of children, including their sexual exploitation. This is a fact, and it is one that we can not avoid. We have rather to deal with it in principled and practical ways. Again we need partnerships to do this.

Primarily we need public-private partnerships with the corporate world itself. There are many good examples of this. In the Tsunami disaster that many businesses contributed, or facilitated contributions, to the relief and recovery effort. I have already mentioned that two-thirds of UNICEF's resources for this operation have come from private sources. In addition to the general public, this included private business, and among these were home-grown businesses in the affected countries themselves. Indonesia's largest bank, for instance, made available its nationwide network of ATMs for donations to UNICEF. We see too one of the world's most powerful businessmen, Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, devoting hundreds of millions of dollars entirely to promote the health of children and women in the developing world. This is actually only the tip of the iceberg. There are huge untapped resources with the private sector that could be mobilized for the benefit of the poor in all of our countries. We just need imagination, new thinking and innovative mechanisms to tap into them, not as government revenue, but as resources to complement the action of governments.

And this makes sense to the corporate world itself. Firstly, by investing in the poor, especially in children, they are helping to reduce disease, ignorance and poverty. This can only broaden the base of those who are the market for their products and services. Secondly, by promoting social and human development, they look good in the public eye. This again is a great selling point in increasing one's market share.

But this is not in itself enough. Yes, we do need increased private investment in human development, especially in the children who represent all our futures. This must not though remain in the domain of charity. We need to promote and facilitate it as solidarity, or as corporate social responsibility. Just as governments should be accountable to the people, so private companies must have a sense of accountability not just to their shareholders but also to the wider community in which they do business. In the case of multinationals that community is the world.

We have seen too some of the excesses of unregulated capitalism with forced labour, including that of children, who ought rather to be in school, with trafficking in human beings, including children, within countries and across borders. Yes, governments must regulate. Yes, governments must prosecute, convict and sanction. Yes, governments must rescue and rehabilitate the victims. But governments can achieve so much more by working with the private sector to inculcate the spirit of corporate responsibility across all of the private sector, as an essential ethic to belong to the club. I remember the amazing example of a former Executive Director of UNICEF, Jim Grant, who in the 1980s negotiated ceasefires between warring parties in internal conflicts in Latin America (*zones of peace for children*), so that children could be immunized. Much has been made of this example for conflict zones, but are there not lessons to be learned in working with the unorganized private sector?

Having just spoken of her predecessor, I am mindful too of the immense contribution that UNICEF's current Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, has made for the cause of children

during her ten years at the helm of what she rightly calls the world's leading agency for children. She has moved the global influence of her organization on from the domain of health to encompass the essential agenda of all of the rights of children. We owe her an immense debt of gratitude, and I should like to note that on her last occasion in her current capacity to be among the Ministers responsible for children in East Asia and the Pacific. Thank you, Carol. We shall miss you in your present incarnation. We look forward to further contact personally and professionally in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

If we are to achieve our goal of a World Fit for Children, if we are to achieve the ambitious goals we set for ourselves through the Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals, governments must provide leadership. But they cannot do it alone. Partnership is an essential part of the human condition. Partnership is essential for all progress and development. Let us resolve to build and strengthen essential partnerships with civil society and the corporate sector, so that together we can achieve what none of us could achieve alone.