



**Convention on the
Rights of the Child**

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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thirty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD (PARTIAL)* OF THE 979th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Friday, 17 September 2004, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Mr. DOEK

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* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

DAY OF GENERAL DISCUSSION

Implementing child rights in early childhood

1. The CHAIRPERSON welcomed the participants to the day of general discussion. He looked forward to hearing their views on a topic that merited greater attention.
2. Ms. IZE-CHARRIN (Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that the Committee's days of general discussion had given rise to many new activities and important decisions, including the United Nations Study on the Impact on Children of Armed Conflict, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and, more recently, the United Nations Study on Violence against Children. The current meeting offered a unique opportunity to reinforce the links between the work of human rights treaty bodies, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations, and a broad spectrum of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The exchange of ideas, experiences and perspectives on early childhood development policies would no doubt result in valuable recommendations for advancing children's rights throughout the world.
3. One of the themes that the working groups would consider was the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which was one of the aims of education enumerated in article 29 of the Convention. That theme would also be discussed by the group of experts entrusted with drafting the action plan of the World Programme for Human Rights Education. Although the first phase of the Programme would focus on human rights education in primary and secondary schools, the draft plan stressed that human rights education required an approach that implemented human rights throughout the entire education system and in all learning environments.
4. Ms. ENGLE (United Nations Children's Fund) said that, throughout its history, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) had considered early childhood care and development to be central to its mission. With the establishment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF had developed an integrated approach to early childhood that took account of the whole child, focusing simultaneously on such aspects as health, education and parenting. Although article 6 of the Convention proclaimed that children had the right to life, survival and development, that right was far from being universally respected. Every year, over 10 million children died before their fifth birthday, largely as a result of preventable diseases and malnutrition. As many as 10 per cent of the world's children had some form of disability or delay in learning; many more children were not adequately prepared for school, owing to persistent ill health, iron deficiency, stunting or lack of learning opportunities at home. The negative messages sometimes received by girls about their ability to learn often had devastating consequences. Each of those factors contributed to poor performance and high dropout rates in the first years of school, resulting in wasted funds and lost opportunities. It was therefore appropriate that, on the eve of the fifteenth anniversary of the Convention, participants should focus their attention on implementing children's rights in early childhood.

5. Other rights of particular concern in early childhood were the right to a name, the right to a nationality, the right to play, the right to health and the right to participation. There were three ways in which the attainment of rights by younger children differed from that of older children. First, younger children were more vulnerable and had a much higher risk of death and deficient growth; moreover, abuse and neglect had a much greater impact when they occurred early in a child's life. Secondly, the family played a significantly larger role in the lives of younger children. Thirdly, there were tremendous opportunities for improving children's earliest years. A large body of research had demonstrated the importance of early childhood development to a child's success later in life.

6. The evolving capacity of young children to participate should be recognized. Contrary to popular belief, children could express their wishes and views from birth onwards through the progressively complex use of gestures and language. Investments were most cost-effective when children were young; thus, societies should strengthen their efforts to match investments to opportunities.

7. The fulfilment of the rights of young children was closely linked to that of women, since children's rights to survival, development and protection could not be achieved without the advancement of women's rights and since gender-based discrimination began in childhood. Men and boys needed to become involved in improving the lives of women and girls. Men should play a key role in the socialization of children, acting not only as role models but also as full participants in family life and responsibilities.

8. The implementation of child rights in early childhood required special attention to disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Societal discrimination often meant that children with disabilities or children from minority groups were denied the health care, nutrition, stimulation and interaction considered normal for other children. Indigenous children posed a special challenge in that regard. Action should be taken to make indigenous communities secure and to allow them to maintain their cultural identity and connection with the land, which would provide a supportive environment for early childhood development.

9. The formulation of a national policy on early childhood development was one of the most effective ways of improving the implementation of the Convention. In order to have a positive impact on the situation of the young child, such policies had to coordinate across diverse sectors - health, nutrition, education, immunization, birth registration and protection. There were many guidelines to facilitate that process, such as the national assessment tool formulated by the World Health Organization (WHO), entitled "Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding", and the maternity protection standards developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO). There was also a large body of research on the kinds of conditions children needed for optimum early child development. The Convention and the outcome document of the special session of the General Assembly devoted to children, held in 2002, could be useful in formulating strategies and allocating resources to improve programmes for children.

10. In order to monitor the implementation of children's rights in early childhood, there was a need for age-disaggregated data on all aspects of children's rights. Governments should invest more resources in early childhood development and work towards implementing the five targets contained in the WHO Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding. Governments should strengthen their support for children in vulnerable circumstances and take measures to

prevent violence against young children. They should ensure the availability of adequate childcare facilities and increase the number of early learning opportunities for young children. Lastly, given the importance of the early childhood period and the lack of clear guidance regarding the implementation of child rights in early childhood, particularly with respect to the young child's evolving capabilities to form his or her own views and express them, she encouraged the Committee to adopt a general comment on that subject.

11. Mr. CHANDRA-MOULI (World Health Organization) said that the survival of the world's newborns and young children must become a priority. If a child's fundamental right to survival could not be guaranteed, no other rights had any meaning. During the current year, some 10 million children would die, most of them from preventable and treatable conditions, such as diarrhoea, malnutrition, malaria and pneumonia. Others, such as large numbers of female children in South-East Asia, would be killed through commission or omission. Although many more children would survive into adulthood, they would not reach their full physical or mental potential.

12. Among the many complex factors contributing to that situation was one that was felt most acutely by WHO staff: the failure of mechanisms delivering health services of proven effectiveness to reach all children who needed them. Poverty was also a contributing factor in child deaths. Other causes of child death included the marginalization of children as a result of social and cultural factors, the distribution of fake remedies and the use of breast milk substitutes in contravention of established guidelines.

13. The priority for WHO was to sustain and increase current coverage of effective health care, particularly care that could be delivered by health services and members of the community. Such care included skilled attendance during pregnancy, childbirth and the immediate post-partum period; access to safe medicines; and the promotion and facilitation of exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, with appropriate complementary feeding from six months and continued breastfeeding for up to two years and beyond.

14. Appropriate and comprehensive policies, strategies and laws were also needed to ensure that families could provide a supportive environment for children's development. The needs of all children, particularly those in marginalized and vulnerable groups, should be addressed. Some schemes had already been developed, including the Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding and the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. The implementation of those strategies throughout the world would require financial commitments that complemented the strategies and provided support to families and communities. Governments should coordinate their actions with those of civil society, bilateral and multilateral agencies and international NGOs and the private sector.

15. Both "A World Fit for Children", the document adopted by the General Assembly at its special session devoted to children, and the Millennium Development Goals had given the international community an opportunity to renew its commitment to the world's children. That commitment would help children to survive, grow and develop into adults who were satisfied with their lives and could contribute to the well-being of their families and communities.

16. Mr. LAUGHARN (Bernard van Leer Foundation) said that, for many reasons children's rights should be seen from the perspective of early childhood. The Convention would be

enhanced if several distinctive aspects of early childhood were considered. Early childhood was a time of rapid development, where investments could have high pay-offs; children's rights should therefore be interpreted to support that development. Child development should not be equated solely with formal education; while the right to schooling was very important, young children should have an opportunity to learn and develop in a wide variety of settings.

17. The international community had concentrated on children's right to protection, which had developed into a well codified legal tradition. Efforts to improve child survival had also proven successful. In the past, the young child's right to develop to his or her full potential had been given less importance. In order to redress that situation, it was necessary to formulate a broad definition of the "capable child" and to highlight the rights in the Convention that contributed to the development of a child's potential. The role of parents should be fully recognised, and States should recognize their responsibility to support parents in accordance with article 18. The "fragmentation" of the child between different ministries and disciplines should be avoided by focusing on holistic and integrated approaches. The education of younger children should include the full development of a child's personality, talents and abilities, since the early years formed the foundation for all subsequent development.

18. There were several arguments that supported the importance of early childhood development. According to the scientific argument, brain cells developed rapidly in early childhood, as did linguistic and cognitive skills and emotional, social and moral capabilities. Governments and policy makers should be assisted in making good use of that knowledge and its cross-sectional linkages, such as how improved nutrition in early years could affect learning capacity later in life. The economic argument was compelling: research in the United States of America had shown that for every dollar spent on early childhood programming, there had been a return of \$7 in terms of benefits to individuals, families, communities and society; similar research in developing countries was crucial. The human development argument was the most convincing, since it demonstrated that early childhood programmes could contribute to social justice. Experience had shown that the most disadvantaged sectors of society received the greatest benefit from programmes that provided care from the antenatal period to the first year of life. Such programmes included home visits and training for parents.

19. In future, the Committee should encourage States parties to consider the rights of the youngest children in equal measure with those of older children. The Committee should also ensure that, when it streamlined the Millennium Development Goals, early childhood programmes were not excluded. A general comment on early childhood would be useful.

20. Governments should consider whether they had allocated sufficient resources to early childhood programmes. In particular, Governments should examine whether existing services concentrated on the most disadvantaged, and whether the obligation under article 18 to support parents in bringing up young children was being fulfilled.

21. Civil society organizations should consider whether their strategies and programmes were rights-based and whether their visions of children focused on children's potential as well as their needs. They should ensure that communities, parents and children were aware of the principles of children's rights and child development, and that the right information was reaching the people involved in decision-making.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 11.05 a.m.