



On the Record for Children

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Welcome to 'On the Record For Children'

Four groups collaborate to produce On the Record. This newsletter is the product of a unique partnership between three organizations that share a commitment to innovative forms of information.

On the Record is a publication of The Advocacy Project, a group that was established in 1998 to make the new information technology more accessible to advocates working on the frontline of peace and human rights. Consistent with this goal, The Advocacy Project has developed an e-mail newsletter -- On the Record -- which it uses to provide e-mail coverage of advocacy campaigns. This can range from covering conferences to profiling community-based groups. To date, 13 series have been produced.

Last month, The Advocacy Project was contacted by the NGO Committee on UNICEF, and asked to cover the Special Session and its PrepComs. The Steering committee asked particularly that the project involve the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) and Children's Express.

CRIN was established in 1995 to distribute news and information about child rights and it now has a membership of over 1,100 organizations in over 100 countries. CRIN's website has become essential reading for anyone seeking documents related to the Special Session.

Children's Express was established in 1975 to help young journalists (aged 8 to 18) cover the news from the perspective of children. CE's teams have won numerous awards and been

nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Its New York bureau will be providing the young journalists to cover next week's meeting.

These three groups are working together to produce a daily printed version of *On the Record*, which will also be sent out via e-mail every day of the conference and posted on the new website of the NGO Committee on UNICEF. We hope that this innovative partnership will prove as stimulating for our readers as it does for the editorial and production teams.

UNICEF Challenged by Child Rights Caucus

Critics claim that the Outcome document perpetuates a separate process

The draft Outcome document for the Special Session on Children has been criticized by child rights advocates for promoting a separate approach to child rights, and advancing UNICEF's own operational agenda, instead of strengthening international gains on child protection that were made during the 1990s.

The Outcome document has been jointly prepared by the Bureau of the Preparatory Committee, which comprises five governments, and UNICEF. The governments are Bangladesh, Bosnia Herzegovina, Germany, Jamaica, and Mali.

The document has been distributed in advance of next week's meeting, and it has already drawn the ire of the Child Rights Caucus, an informal lobbying group of nongovernmental organizations.

Jo Becker from Human Rights Watch, a Caucus member, said that the Outcome document is "too heavy" on traditional UNICEF goals like nutrition, and too weak on protecting the rights of children who are exposed to threats like war and child labour. "It reflects UNICEF's operational approach and priorities, not the full range of child rights."

This was strongly disputed by Kul Gautam, UNICEF's Deputy Executive Director. In an interview with *On the Record*, Mr. Gautam said that UNICEF had been buffeted by conflicting pressures while putting together the document. Several governments, including the United States, have complained that the document is too heavy on rights, he said. Sources also say that the International Labour Organization (ILO) has demanded that more space be given to child labour.

Mr. Gautam portrayed all this as the price to be paid for reconciling different opinions. But he also insisted that UNICEF was taking its cue from governments, which set out the document's framework at the last preparatory committee meeting.

In addition to expressing concern at the content of the document, Ms. Becker warned against perpetuating what she described as a "separate process" that began at the 1990 World Summit on Children and its plan of action.

This approach, she said, had less international support than the web of treaties and human rights mechanisms that were created to strengthen the protection of children during the 1990s. These

are gaining support from governments and civil society, she said. The problem is that they need better data, tougher monitoring and better coordination. The Special Session is ideally suited to provide momentum.

The Child Rights Caucus plans to issue an alternative text of the Outcome document and its own position paper.

The Caucus criticism comes at an awkward time for UNICEF, which has struggled to accommodate the needs of NGOs at next week's meeting. Over 1000 NGO participants have pre-registered, and in a break with UN tradition they will include many who work with UNICEF in their own countries. UNICEF feels this will ensure more participation from civil society.

It remains to be seen whether this will be affected by the disagreement between UNICEF and the Child Rights Caucus - and whether the difference is one of tactics or substance.

Mr. Gautam said that UNICEF has consistently supported the Convention on the Rights of the Child. On the other hand, he said, the "rights-based approach" is not the answer to every problem. "It should be promoted with common sense, not as a theology."

While not disputing the conflicting pressures on UNICEF, the Child Rights Caucus is likely to dispute the implication that human rights is merely one interest group among many. Rather, they see it as an approach that is near to gaining universal acceptance.

Comment From the NGO Committee on UNICEF:

The NGO Steering Committee of the NGO Committee on UNICEF welcomes you to the second Preparatory Committee Meeting of the Special Session for Children.

Over 1,000 NGO representatives have registered for this PrepCom - numerous enough to have an impact on the final outcome document and thereby on the direction for children in the next decade. The government Bureau and UNICEF (as Secretariat) have made a commendable effort to be as inclusive as possible, inviting over 3,600 NGOs. Still, the process of empowering NGOs is never-ending, and we cannot let the momentum falter.

The NGO Committee on UNICEF has established a Steering Committee for the Special Session, comprised of 12 international NGOs with national affiliates and local NGO partners in many countries. We have worked hard to organize daily briefings, regional caucuses, consultation and orientation sessions that can help new NGOs to navigate the procedural maze of passes, security and other encumbrances of the complex UN arena.

We have done our utmost to secure enough places where we can meet and network with like-minded colleagues; to accommodate the huge number of requests for space, events, statements, and plenary interventions as fairly as possible. And we have endeavored to include children and youth as active participants throughout the Meeting. But there will be inevitable glitches and slipups that are outside our control. Arranging for simultaneous interpretation of all events outside the plenaries continues to be a serious problem. All of these activities are expensive.

That is the stage we have set for NGO actors to play their parts. But it is a small stage and we are immensely diverse in size, resources, regional representation, the issues and policies we advocate and the approaches we take. Democracy is about creating an environment for the voices of the smallest and the largest to be heard equally.

At the same time, for real input and impact at this PrepCom, we also need to join forces and voices - speaking as a resolute and powerful chorus. Let us join caucuses and coalitions and find our way to influence governments through collective decisions for advocacy and action. Let's discuss, debate and disagree, but choose our battles wisely.

The path before us is still long and the end is not in sight. Working together and setting achievable goals will make our advance that much surer and steadier towards our common longterm mission - to fulfill the rights of all children everywhere.

About the NGO Committee

The NGO Committee on UNICEF is an independent worldwide network of 125 international NGOs that work on behalf of children in more than 100 countries. It has set up working groups on Girls, Children in Armed Conflict, Education and Child Rights.

The Committee was established in 1952 and is currently governed by an elected board that comprises a president, a vice president, treasurer, eight NGO member organizations, and Working Group chairs. It is based in New York and Geneva.

This structure is now being made more decentralized, to ensure more inclusive membership and better coordination with UNICEF. The new structure will comprise 8 new regional committees. Two of which are already working on birth registration and children without families.

The Committee has an obvious interest in the outcome of the Special Session, and last September, it created a steering committee, comprising ten of its member NGOs, to work on the Special Session and the remaining two PrepComs. The steering committee invited the Advocacy Project to produce this newsletter in partnership with CRIN and Children's Express.

To the Edge, But With Caution

Kul Gautam, UNICEF's Deputy Executive Director, tells On the Record what UNICEF really thinks about child rights.

Kul Gautam is on familiar ground. In 1990, as director of UNICEF's Planning and Coordination office, he was the point man for preparing the Declaration and Plan of Action at the World Summit for Children. That historic gathering of world leaders triggered the shift in UNICEF from a humanitarian aid agency into a defender of human rights.

A decade later Kul Gautam is back on the hot seat as Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, directing preparations for the Special Session on Children this September and still trying to strike a balance between development and rights within UNICEF.

It is not easy. The draft outcome document prepared for the Special Session has already been criticised by NGOs for paying too much attention to traditional child survival and too little to protection. At the same time, UNICEF is being taken to task by the United States for downplaying child survival.

UNICEF believes that child survival and protection go hand in hand, and if anyone can make the case it is Kul Gautam. His first UNICEF posting in 1973 to Cambodia showed what war does to children.

In 1986, Gautam was brought to UNICEF headquarters by James Grant, UNICEF's legendary Executive Director. Gautam agreed that Grant initially had reservations about child rights because he felt that advocates were too preoccupied with individual abuse - "one child being flogged" - and too little interested in the "crimes of omission" which condemned millions of children to poverty and disease.

More important for UNICEF, human rights meant putting governments on the spot. Instead of applauding governments for saving lives, UNICEF would be accusing governments for failing to meet their legal obligations and letting children die. This was a profound shift.

Yet once Grant realised that the Convention on the Rights of the Child was attainable, he threw his energy into turning it into a usable tool and ensuring that it included the full range of social and economic rights. With the convention drafted, Grant instructed UNICEF to push for the convention's adoption and then its universal ratification.

James Grant remained an advocate to the very end. Close to death, he wrote to President Clinton urging that the United States sign the convention. Hillary Clinton read out her husband's positive response at Grant's memorial service. Unfortunately, to this day, the United States has still not ratified the Convention.

Just how committed is UNICEF to the rights-based approach? Skeptics have their doubts, but Kul Gautam makes a convincing case. Poverty is at the root of many problems affecting children, he says. Poverty is caused by a lack of choice, which in turn comes from discrimination. Discrimination is at the heart of human rights abuses.

This line of reasoning is revolutionizing aid programs and UNICEF has been pushing it hard within the UN system. But, says Gautam, the guiding principle must be the best interest of the child, and this is not always best served by strident accusations. "You don't go to a minister of finance and say 'that kid out there seems to be in trouble. How come you are not allocating more of your budget (on street children)?"

So just how far can the rights-based approach be pushed? "To the edge," replies Gautam. "Just make sure you know where the edge is."

One way of advancing the rights agenda is to work with allies who have a clearer mandate to be outspoken. Civil society is a key ally and UNICEF hopes that the forthcoming meeting will help to generate a groundswell of support for a "global movement on behalf of children" to be launched in advance of the Special Session. At the same time, Gautam downplays expectations. "People are suffering from conference fatigue. There's a lot of cynicism."

The "rights-based approach," of course, does not permit cynicism. In spite of the horrors of the 1990s, which took a frightful toll on children, Kul Gautam sees a profound change since his first depressing tour of duty in Cambodia. "This is an imperfect world, but now people don't have to be convinced about what is right and wrong. The rights-based approach means morality and accountability."

The Eyes and Ears of Youth

Two weeks ago, the young journalists of Children's Express covered the inauguration of a new American president. Next week, they will be covering the preparatory committee meeting for 'On the Record.' Here, they explain their mission and way of working.

Who We Are:

Children's Express is an international nonprofit news service that produces stories by reporters (ages 8 to 13) and editors (ages 14 to 18) for adult print, broadcast, and online media.

For 25 years, Children's Express has given children a significant voice in the world by leveraging the adult media to bring these authentic voices to opinion leaders and the general public. Headquartered in Washington, DC, CE operates US bureaus in New York City, Washington, D.C.; and Marquette, Michigan.

CE/UK operates bureaus in the United Kingdom, in London, Newcastle, Sheffield, Birmingham, and Plymouth. Bureaus just opened in Belfast, Northern Ireland and in Tokyo, Japan. Plans are underway to bring Children's Express to more countries in the developed and developing worlds, such as Germany, South Africa, China, and Vietnam.

On TV:

CE reporters and editors have appeared on television venues worldwide-including CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, BBC, ZDF, NHK, NTV, PBS, and TV Tokyo. And Children's Express is the proud recipient of both Emmy and George Foster Peabody awards for its 1988 television series. CE/UK just completed a powerful documentary on teenage sexuality; in the next year, CE/North America will be airing a public television special on diversity through the eyes of the young.

In Print:

CE articles are carried by newspapers across the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. CE stories have appeared in papers from The Guardian to The Chicago Tribune to The Asahi

Shimbun. CE has published three books, including *Voices From the Future: Children Speak Out About Violence in America*.

On the Radio:

CE stories have been heard on National Public Radio, Public Radio International, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corp. and Voice of America.

Online:

CE's award-winning website is recognized by Yahoo, Lycos, Net Magazine and the American Library Association as an outstanding site, of interest to both youth and adults. CE's Japanese language portion of the site was similarly honored by Yahoo Japan.

Around the World:

CE news teams travel around the world to interview policymakers, world leaders and children in crisis, and report on the conditions of children-in places such as Bangladesh, Bosnia, Cambodia, Cuba, Haiti, Israel, Kuwait, Russia, South Africa and Tanzania.

Special Projects:

In the United States, CE news teams have covered every political convention since 1976, this year bringing a team of almost 80 CE journalists from bureaus around the world.

Unique Perspective, Unique Experience:

CE's methodology relies on the spoken word, making the program accessible to children with varying levels of literacy and language skills. Membership has no academic prerequisite and is free to any child who wishes to join. Approximately 750 kids are in the active press corps. Alumni pursue careers in print and broadcast journalism, public policy, youth advocacy and international and community relations.

Knee Deep in Garbage

15 year-old Guri Shkodra from Kosovo gives meaning to participation

One of the goals of the Special Session is to encourage participation by children. Over the last two years the Advocacy Project has worked with a young campaigner who gives meaning to the term. 15 year-old Guri Shkodra, co-founder of the Kosova Group of Young Ecologists, has forced the world to confront the legacy of war and neglect that makes Kosovo one of the world's most polluted provinces. It is an inspiring example of how children need not simply participate - but take the lead.

On December 1, 1999, Guri Shkodra and his group of Young Ecologists dressed up as condoms and marched through Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo, to celebrate International AIDS day. They gave out real condoms and brought traffic to a standstill.

It was a typical performance by a savvy young advocate. Guri decided to champion the environment in the spring of 1999, while a refugee in Macedonia. He returned to find his home town, Prishtina, littered with stinking rubbish. The countryside was strewn with landmines and unexploded cluster bombs.

Guri joined up with two other schoolfriends to form the Group of Young Ecologists. Their first task was to build a constituency, and they decided to start with children. Guri tried out the message on his five-year-old brother. Armed with his advice, Young Ecologists visited kindergartens, handed out coloring books and discussed the environment. It was more difficult to get through to the older kids, many of whom liked to catch birds and cut their wings. The Young Ecologists patiently explained how this damaged the environment.

They were always on the lookout for new ideas and they struck the right note - mischievous but not malevolent. This was guaranteed to appeal to the international agencies, which were desperate to work with Kosovars with community spirit. Guri knew that he had a willing audience in the international agencies for his brand of advocacy. They painted 40 pictures for an exhibition of young Kosovar artists. They took part in festivals. They produced a poster urging Kosovars to 'save their environment' and then took it to UNICEF, which printed 60 copies.

Of course, youth and charm have been central to their success. But that may be tested in the months ahead. Guri was shocked to discover that only one of the 20 transitional departments (ministries) set up by the UN Mission in Kosovo lacked a local director. It was, of course, the Environment Department. This is the sort of bureaucratic neglect that calls for sophisticated techniques and political clout, not youthful enthusiasm.

Or does it? We were with Guri when he learned that the UN Mission in Kosovo was planning to recycle glass and aluminium. This was actually a belated response to criticism from the Young Ecologists over Prishtina's garbage. Score one for youth. But that was not why Guri's eyes lit up at the news. Visions of school children scouring the parks of Prishtina in search of empty bottles began to dance in front of his eyes.

Lights! Cameras! Cans! Kids!