



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 1: Children in India

From the AP Editorial Desk

"If we told people in India to 'Say Yes' for children," says Savita Naqvi-Varde, Communications Chief for the country's UNICEF office, "they would probably think we were encouraging them to reproduce with abandon." In a country with the world's second largest population and a fertility rate that ranges from 3.3 to 5 in states such as Uttar Pradesh, which is the country's most populous, such a call would have done little to advance the plight of Indian children. "Instead," says Naqvi-Varde, "we had to make the Global Movement for Children (GMC) culturally specific and palatable."

Naqvi-Varde and her colleagues turned the 'Say Yes' slogan on its head and presented it as something to which most people would find it difficult to say 'no.' Thousands of brochures were distributed to Indian school children, government ministers, and non-governmental associations. They posed the question: "If someone asked you, 'are children important' what would you say?"

"Many Indians think of foreign organizations as colonial agents," explains Naqvi-Varde. The idea of imposing a perceived Western paradigm of child rights on a culture that prides itself on respect for elders was not going to work.

"Instead, we drew people into the Movement by utilizing the rhetoric that children are our future—something that nobody can deny." And India, she points out, has a long history of activism. Phrases like Garibi Hatao ("Get rid of poverty") Desh Bachao ("Save the nation"), or calls to practice satyagraha (nonviolence), have been an integral part of the Indian psyche since Independence.

UNICEF India had to be careful not to appear condescending or naive to a politically savvy country. "We saw the GMC as simply an opportunity to ring new alarm bells, invoke a sense of legitimate outrage at the status of children in the country, and dispense with 'business as usual,'" says Naqvi-Varde. Her team focused on initiating new partnerships with civil society organizations, celebrities and politicians.

They also worked on implementing the ten directives of the Rallying Call. (See box) "There was no single issue which unified GMC partners around the country," says Naqvi-Varde, "With a weak coalition government ruling the country, each Indian state functions as a separate country." Advocacy for the girl child and child participation were chosen as common themes.

TEN PRIORITIES

The Global Movement for Children was launched in April 2001 with a Rallying Call, comprising ten pledges. Visit the GMC website for more information on how you can do more.

1. Leave no Child Out
2. Put Children First
3. Care for Every Child
4. Fight HIV/AIDS
5. Stop Harming and Exploiting Children
6. Listen to Children
7. Educate Every Child
8. Protect Children from War
9. Protect the Earth for Children
10. Fight Poverty: Invest in Children

Going Cyber

On April 26, the 'Say Yes' campaign was launched in several schools across India. An initial 1,500 children said 'yes' by signing their names on a cloth banner. The "Hindustan Times," one of the country's leading papers, published free announcements of the Say Yes pledge forms in its national editions and in 'Pace,' a supplement that goes out to some 450 schools throughout the country.

In a collaborative effort with the Indian Department of Education, millions of ballots were eventually distributed throughout the country's private and public school system. NGOs organized extemporaneous speech competitions for school children who were asked to elaborate on each of the ten imperatives. Some 1,000 schools have participated in student projects concerning the ten imperatives.

UNICEF's India Country Office also linked up with NGOs to ensure that pledge forms were distributed to street children as well as those in slum and resettlement communities where school attendance is low.

"I distributed thousands of forms this way," says Rekha Rajput of "Mahila Uthan Samiti," an NGO that works in slum communities in northern states. "First, I discussed each of the ten points with community members and children. We talked about their concerns and I answered their questions. People were eager to learn more and to join the movement."

At the other end of the spectrum, cyber partnerships were developed with mainstream internet providers and popular websites such as Mantra Online to target wealthier children and professionals. "Less than one percent of the Indian population has web access," says Naqvi-

Varde. "But young, aspiring professionals from top schools are an influential lot and we wanted to reach them as well."

In addition, popular television channels, from MTV to the state-run Doordarshan television network, have run free spots publicizing the GMC. UNICEF India also teamed up with a UNAIDS/MTV project that featured young people who had advice for world leaders on how to control the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Enter the Celebrities

Throughout India, Parliamentarians joined local politicians, national celebrities, civic leaders and sports stars to mobilize support for children. UNICEF leaflets on the GMC and the Say Yes campaign were mailed to parliamentarians with a cover letter from the Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha and President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Dr. Najma Heptullah. Momentum has also picked up following the creation of a National Commission for Children last year.

UNICEF has also partnered with the private sector, in particular the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), which has promoted the GMC at their meetings and encouraged members and affiliates to fill out 'Say Yes' pledge forms both online and at CII meetings.

Even the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, joined in during an Independence Day speech on August 15, 2001, in which he referred to children as "the most precious wealth of our nation. The Prime Minister recalled having attended the 1990 World Summit on Children and committed the Indian government to participating fully at the forthcoming Special Session.

That participation will surely be helped by the experience being gained through the Global Movement. The challenge, say UNICEF staff in India, will be to keep the GMC moving well beyond the Special Session.

Care for Every Child

- India has the largest number of young people in the world. Forty percent or 398 million children and young people under the age of 18 live in the country.
- The infant mortality rate is 70 per 1,000 live births. There are huge disparities between states, however. The western state of Orissa has the country's highest IMR at 98 per 1,000 live births while the southern state of Kerala has 14 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, which is almost the same rate for Western countries
- The under-five mortality rate is 95 per 1,000 live births

- 66 percent of all births in India are not attended by trained health professionals
- There are 4,488 cases of neonatal tetanus every year
- At least 23 percent of Indian babies have a dangerously low birth weight
- Almost half of all children under the age of five are underweight
- Only 35 percent of births are officially registered
- One-third of the world's malnourished children- 54 million-live in India. This is almost half of the country's entire population of young people
- Guineaworm has been completely eradicated from India and polio is on the verge of eradication. In the year 2000, there only 255 cases of polio were reported.
- More than 38,000 children contract measles each year and many do not receive treatment for the affliction
- Only one-third of Indian children have access to a toilet
- One million children under the age of five are killed by diarrhea every year
- 78 percent of the Indian population has access to safe drinking water
- Almost half of all Indian children or 137 million live below the poverty line
- One in every five Indian children suffers from some type of disability
- 38 percent of Indian children have been fully immunized
- Only half of all Indian households use adequately iodized salt

