



On the Record for Children

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Split in Youth Caucus Highlights Dilemma of Youth Participation

Conservative mischief, distrust by governments and adult imposition combine to discourage young voices

In a move that has highlighted the difficulties that face young people in trying to participate in the Special Session process, a group of under-18s decided on Wednesday that they could no longer take part in a 'youth caucus' that had been set up two days earlier.

The decision to withdraw was taken after a series of frustrating and confusing incidents, which have left many of the young delegates disillusioned and ready to abandon any attempt to organize in a formal manner.

'We're pretty pissed off,' admitted 17 year-old Adam Jones, a student from Victoria University (Canada) who is also with Save the Children Canada. He said that the breakaway group has no plans to create a new caucus.

Mr. Jones was one of several young delegates who were embarrassed on Tuesday by the statement of a young woman who they elected to speak on their behalf before the PrepCom panel on adolescent development. Instead of talking about participation, as agreed, the young woman unexpectedly made a strong defense of 'family values' and against abortion. Mr. Jones described her address as a 'tirade.'

Caucus members assumed she had been planted in the caucus by conservative groups, which see the concept of 'participation by children' as a surreptitious attack on the authority of parents. These groups seem determined to undermine any PrepCom initiative, which helps children to organize, and quickly packed the new youth caucus with recruits.

Many of the younger members of the youth caucus were also irritated by a decision of the caucus on Tuesday to reject an offer by governments to put together a 3-day meeting of young people starting on September 15, before the Special Session.

The forum would have allowed 200 young delegates to draft their own Outcome document and speak their piece with minimal involvement by adults. The proposal was accepted on Monday by a narrow majority at a large meeting, but rejected by the youth caucus later that same day.

The final straw appears to have come on Wednesday at a meeting of the caucus in which under-18s found themselves outnumbered by 'youth' who appeared to be in their mid-twenties. One young delegate noted that the Special Session is for children and that the UN defines children as being under the age of 18.

In some ways, children are far more involved at this session of the PrepCom than the first session. At least five governments –Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Peru and Jamaica – have children on their delegations. Over fifty children participated in a 2-day gathering organized by the Save the Children Alliance before the PrepCom, and emerged with a clear sense of purpose and some cohesion. This cohesion has now been shaken by the events of the last few days.

Ironically, the ill-fated youth caucus was born of a printing error. The original idea was that under-18s would be given a space where they could talk and meet. This was printed up as a 'caucus' by mistake, allowing the conservatives to pounce. They have been able to exploit the fact that caucuses exclude no one, and all decisions are taken by consensus.

All of this raises the key question – whether the Special Session on children can deliver on the fundamental right of children to participate in decisions, which affect them.

This right is clearly spelled out in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But the procedural problems of operating in the UN system, not to mention the political manipulation, are making it increasingly difficult.

Scarred by their experiences, several young people feel that the caucus may not be the way to go – unless it emerges naturally from the desire of the children themselves. 'You would never put adults in a room and ask them to make a statement on behalf of adults,' said Mr. Jones.

At the same time, there is growing concern that children will be permitted a 'token' involvement at the Special Session, in the form of a few opening statements by carefully selected young speakers. This would be a long way from achieving the goal that many child advocates have set their heart on – namely letting children set the terms of their own involvement in the Special Session and so 'doing what children do best.'

At the very least, many NGOs feel that the clear, small voice of children speaking out the range of problems that affect them can have a profound impact on adult debate. 'Children are their own best advocates,' said Matt Scott from World Vision. 'They tell it like it is.'

Even this may now be in jeopardy as a result of the current confusion. And ironically, the more that NGOs try to help, guide and direct young people, the more they impose their own agenda – and the harder it becomes for kids to be kids.

US Contempt for Convention Brings 'Spoiler' Charge from NGOs

12 Days into the Bush Administration, a blistering US attack on social and economic rights

To the anger of many NGOs, the US delegation has launched a blistering attack on the Outcome document and insisted that its many references to child rights be drastically revised.

Speaking to the plenary on Thursday, Ambassador Michael Southwick described the current draft as a 'confusing mix with ill-defined goals' and urged the Bureau of the PrepCom to prepare a 'new, shorter draft' before the next session in June.

'We believe that the text goes too far when it asserts entitlements based on the economic, social and cultural rights contained in the Convention (on the Rights of the Child) and other instruments,' he said. 'The human rights based approach, while laudable in its objectives, poses significant problems as used in this text.'

Speaking later to a large audience of NGOs, Ambassador Southwick redoubled his attack on the Convention. Together with Somalia, the US government has yet to ratify the Convention. 'The United States does not accept obligations based on it nor do we accept that it is the best or only framework for developing programs and policies to benefit children,' he said.

The US intervention came at a critical moment in the PrepCom. The Outcome document has been buffeted by criticism on all sides, and several issues of key concern to NGOs – notably the participation of young people – are unresolved.

Many NGOs are astonished that critics of child rights have been able to walk into caucus groups at will and disrupt NGO meetings – sometimes without proper accreditation. Yet the US

embassy in Colombo refused to give a visa to two young Sri Lankans who applied to attend the PrepCom, in spite of their being supported by UNICEF.

Against this background, the US statement was greeted with despair and even anger by some NGOs. Many had expected the Bush Administration to be lukewarm towards international commitments, but no one expected to hear it so soon, and delivered with such force.

Ambassador Southwick said that it was too soon to expect policy from the twelve day old administration. But, he said, no one should expect the Bush Administration to send the Convention to the US Senate for ratification.

This was partly a question of strategy, he said, because the Senate will simply not ratify the Convention. But at the same time, Ambassador Southwick made it clear that the Bush administration takes issue with the very concept of social, cultural, and economic rights, which underpin the Convention. The United States believes in 'progressive implementation' of these rights. The role of government is to create the conditions in which these rights can be realized. 'This is not something that states can confer. It is not an entitlement.'

Such a view is starkly at odds with the position of child rights activists. To many it sounded like a throwback to the era when the United States was happy to stand alone in rejecting international treaties, which have almost universal acceptance.

One Australian NGO representative warned Ambassador Southwick that the United States was widely seen as a 'spoiler' for its position. 'Governments will look at the US and ask why they should bother.'

Ambassador Southwick replied that almost all countries in the world had benefited from American aid. Earlier, he had claimed that the United States does more for children than any other country.

This ignored the fundamental question that will overshadow the Special Session: will children be better off with a system that enforces rights and holds governments accountable, or with conventional aid programs which have so clearly failed to rescue children from poverty and abuse?

Tobacco Firms Target Young Girls

Parallels seen between AIDS and tobacco use

Girls are being intensely targeted by tobacco companies, causing long-term damage to their health, according to the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS).

Speaking on behalf of WAGGGS at a briefing on Thursday, 15 year-old Resham Patel, a Girl Scout from New Jersey, described how WAGGGS is encouraging its Girl Scouts to learn about the dangers of tobacco use and pass this information on to their peers.

The panel also heard that there are parallels between smoking and the AIDS epidemic, both of which threaten teenagers worldwide. People engage in high-risk behavior at vulnerable periods of their life, and few periods are as unsettling as the teenage years. Teenagers want to act like adults, but they lack the information and confidence to protect themselves.

Although smoking is decreasing overall in the United States, it is on the increase among young people – especially girls. Girls in this country – and for that matter, around the world – are particularly susceptible to tobacco advertising.

Patti Repetto, from the New York City Department of Health, pointed out that while tobacco companies are forbidden to target children, they advertise to people in the 18 to 24-year-old age group. These are the people that children want to emulate.

Speakers noted that from an early age children see images of happy and healthy people smoking. Cigarette lighters are designed to appeal to children, school book covers subliminally advertise cigarettes, and tobacco products are sold next to candy. These tactics are effective in enticing vulnerable young people to smoke.

As Ms. Joey Koldare (Mothers and Daughters Race Against Teen Smoking) explained, girls who are taking the critical step of 'emergence' from childhood latch onto symbols of maturity. Cigarettes are one such symbol. Likewise, girls in traditional cultures may be trying to adopt elements of modern culture, and smoking can be a means for them to assert their independence from old-fashioned ways.

WAGGGS, one of the world's largest organizations for girls and young women, has come up with powerful methods to counteract the tobacco companies' deadly campaign – by using its network of scout troops. Ms. Patel said that Girl Scouts earn promotions by studying tobacco issues and transmitting what they have learned to other troops.

'Now I have a background in tobacco, and I can go talk to younger girls. Girls can teach each other to say no. Girls are being advocates of our own issues, which improves our self-esteem, gives us a voice of our own,' said Ms. Patel. She added that peer training enhances girls' self-confidence and leadership capabilities. This in turn provides a sense of pride that can be an alternative to smoking.

Describing the parallels between the spread of HIV/AIDS and tobacco use, Ms. Soon-Young Noon, New York Liaison for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, called the use of tobacco a 'preventable epidemic that is spiraling out of control.' She noted that with both AIDS and tobacco use, the long period that passes between exposure and disease makes it seem that 'you can't see the risk.'

Ms. Noon cautions that women, children, and the poor are the most at risk from tobacco, because they have less access to health care. 'Diseases from tobacco are going to be the leading burden of disease in developing countries in the next 10 years,' she said.

Back to the Drawing Board for the Outcome Document

NGOs assured of input into the drafting

It is back to the drawing board for the team responsible for drafting the Outcome document, A World Fit For Children.

A plethora of conflicting approaches, views and demands have been delivered by government delegates during the PrepCom, including a number of calls for a shorter text accompanied by suggestions for additional material.

Governments have been forceful in their comments, but the NGOs have also made themselves heard. On Thursday, the Child Rights Caucus circulated its own alternative text, which incorporates amendments from about 80 organizations and other caucuses. In an impressive display of NGO discipline, the Caucus has spent most of the week coordinating the drafting.

Ms. Karin Shampoo, Deputy Director of UNICEF, said Thursday that both NGOs and governments generally favoured a more concise, better-structured, action-oriented document, which is less of a 'shopping list' than the existing version and with strong linkage to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

But later in the day US Ambassador E. Michael Southwick showed that even this might be hard to achieve. Although Washington wants a 'new, sharper draft' and clearer language on responsibilities for implementation, he said, it opposes a rights-oriented approach.

Work on redrafting the Outcome document will begin almost as soon as the PrepCom is over. 'The Bureau has listened to all comments and we'll work on the document until June so that we can then all have a very constructive Special Session in September,' said Ms. Shampoo.

Bill Bell, of the Child Rights Caucus, said that discussions were now under way with UNICEF about how to accommodate input from NGOs during re-drafting. A statement that accompanied the alternative NGO draft noted that although the text used the structure of the official document, 'a large majority of NGOs at this PrepCom believe that the final outcome document must adopt a clearer, less repetitive, more action-oriented structure.'

Another NGO spokesperson emphasised the importance of lobbying governments during the next few months. 'Now all the hard work begins,' he said.

Disabled Kids Must Have a Seat at the Special Session Says Armenian Advocate

Children with disabilities must be actively engaged at the next PreCom and the Special Session, according to Ms. Penelope Giragosian, founder and Executive Director of a relief organization in Armenia.

In an interview with On the Record, Ms. Giragosian said that she hopes to mobilize a caucus on disability and also organize a group of children with disabilities to come to the next PrepCom. 'The invisibility of children with disabilities during this PrepCom is distressing,' she said.

According to a global UNICEF survey on Young People with Disabilities, one in every ten children face a significant disabling condition. Their situation is 'not only desperate, it is all too often overlooked.'

The Child Rights Caucus agrees. A CRC document for the PrepCom said: '150 million children and youth globally have a disability and face discrimination in access to life-saving treatments, health care and education. The voices of children with disabilities and their families are not being heard.'

The precise number of disabled children in Armenia is not known, said Ms. Grigosian, because the collection of statistics is so poor. But, she said, disabled children were routinely institutionalized and treated badly when Armenia was part of the Soviet Union. The births of those who failed to live past 28 days were not even recorded during the era of Stalin, she said.

This kind of crudeness is a thing of the past, but there is still stigma attached to disability in Armenia. Ms. Giragosian recalled seeing a group of distraught parents of disabled children in Yerevan. 'They were banging on windows and shouting: 'we want education for our children. Why should they be spit on by my neighbors in the street? Why should they be beaten up at school?'

Ms. Giragosian has come to this PrepCom to advocate for the rights of disabled children, and also to participate in a panel on the Transcaucuses, including Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. It was organized by the Armenian Relief Society (ARS), of which she is a member.

She herself was disabled at the age of 18 by an accident, and she intimately understands the difficulties facing disabled people. 'It is like being able to look through a slightly opened door. It is not wide enough for you to fit through and all the movement is on the other side.'

Ms. Giragosian founded her organization – known as 'Armenians for Peaks' – in 1994. She underlined the critically important need to have international partners, but she criticized UNICEF for not following up after a UN Conference on Childhood Disability that was held Yerevan, Armenia in 1998.

The meeting helped to open up the issue in Armenia, she said, but there had been no projects launched to implement the plans adopted. 'We cannot implement programs alone,' she said. 'We need (the kind of) support and a partnership that will help us at the ministerial level.'

Gulbadan Habibi, a Programme Officer with the Childhood Disability Program at UNICEF, said that there was 'much more awareness at UNICEF' about the special needs of children. There was also recognition that children with disabilities 'need to be mainstreamed within society.'

Ms. Habibi's own post was created in 1996, providing a focal point in disability with UNICEF. And, said Ms. Habibi, the last State of the World's Children Report gave much more prominence to the issue of disabled children than previous issues.

NGOs agree that any initiative on behalf of disabled children at the next PrepCom would require not just resources, but also special provisions in crowded conference rooms for wheelchairs as well as facilities for children who are visually impaired.

Many agree with Ms. Giragosian that the effort should be made for one of the most vulnerable categories under debate at the PrepCom. If any voice needs to be heard, it is this one.

Religious Groups Square Off Around the Outcome Document

Two Islamic views at odds

Religious groups are engaged in a rugged skirmish over whether the Outcome document undermines or reinforces the family – and whether it supports abortion.

Speaking on behalf of the International Islamic Committee for Woman and Child (IICWC) at a Tuesday briefing, Dr. Amani Faraj assailed the document for ignoring religion and undermining the family. She also condemned what she referred to as the document's 'deliberate negligence' of abortion. 'A foetus is a child,' she said.

Dr. Amani Faraj also said that the document reflected a Western bias. 'Why is the UN trying to impose (its) own Western agenda on us?' she asked.

Lauralee Christensen, president of the US-based United Families International, said she agreed with the IICWC's arguments. 'I applaud you. You are not alone. We'll support your recommendations.'

The idea that child rights as expressed by the UN is somehow at odds with Islam was challenged by Mr. Essam Ali, coordinator of the NGO Coalition on the Rights of the Child. Mr. Ali pointed out that all Muslim countries except Somalia have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Mr. Ali agreed that the North African caucus, which met Wednesday, had raised concerns about the Outcome document. But, he said, these were about environmental health, social and economic policies, child labour as well as the effect of sanctions and conflict in the Middle East. They were not about the family.

Kathy Vandergrift of World Vision also defended the UN's basic approach to children's rights. 'When people say they are in favour of the family, my answer is 'So am I.'

Ms. Vandergrift said that the draft Outcome document 'makes it clear that we should work with families' and that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) also takes families seriously. 'If you want to mount a campaign against the CRC, ask yourself whether the world would be a better place without it. I doubt it.'

Many had predicted a row among religious groups at this PrepCom, but the intensity of the current debate has caught some by surprise. Christian conservatives appear to be making a

determined attempt to infiltrate and disrupt key NGO caucus meetings, in the hope of imposing their own agenda.

Some supposedly 'pro-family' groups have tried to introduce language into caucus resolutions that is clearly out of place. In one example, they tried to introduce wording that attacks condoms and divorce into proposals that are being prepared by the NGO caucus on children in conflict.

This is so fundamentally unhelpful – and disrespectful of the fate of children in war – that many see it as a wrecking tactic, pure and simple. One said it could damage the very idea of a caucus, which relies on consensus.

Part 2

Girl Power in the Andes

On Tuesday, delegates to the PrepCom heard that throughout the world girls face discrimination, neglect, poverty and violence. How can this crisis be reversed? One answer is to let girls be girls. Julie Starr of The Advocacy Project recently investigated a project in Ecuador which has managed, almost by accident, to capture the imagination of girls in a poor village. The result has changed their lives.

With guidance and leadership from Dana Platin, a former US Peace Corps volunteer, a small group of indigenous children in Ecuador has proven that enthusiasm and dedication can counter the poverty faced by many indigenous communities.

In 1997, Ms. Platin was posted to the small Andean village of Quitugo as a women's health educator. Although the village women promised that they would attend her workshops, Ms. Platin grew frustrated as she worked hard to prepare quality courses and then waited for adult participants to show up.

But ten little girls showed up for the workshops and insisted that they were interested, even though the courses were supposed to be about breast cancer and detecting cervical cancer in its early stages. Their ages ranged from eight to 13 years old.

The girls watched Ms. Platin fail with the women, and they tried to help. They went door to door advocating for her, translating for her into their native Quichua language, begging for support on Ms. Platin's behalf.

After she realized that her efforts were indeed being appreciated, but by the girls, Ms. Platin changed the focus of her projects. With enthusiastic input from the girls, she decided to write a grant to start a small business.

So was born the Grupo 'Mushu Muyo' ('New Seed' in the Quichua language). The girls chose the name because it promised a new future, like a seed in the earth that will grow strong and proud.

The group project is now two years old, and starting to work. The girls make cards out of recycled paper, which they then sell. It helps to combat the poverty in which they live. They are also starting to invest their profits in education, food, medicine and clothing.

In the indigenous culture of Ecuador, it is likely that a female without education will enter womanhood as an 'empleada', or maid. She will wash dishes for \$8 a month and barely make enough to live. The chances are even less that she will have the resources to put herself through school. Children as young as two years old have been forced to work in the fields or turn to the city streets to beg.

Against such a context the achievements of the 'New Seed' group have been nothing short of miraculous. After just two years, the girls have made huge strides towards becoming independent and responsible.

They are also close to taking full ownership of their recycling paper business. They have collected garbage and turned it into art, which they have sold. Recently, they began recycling banana peels into paper, demonstrating great originality in the design. These little artisans are using their proceeds – small but growing – to educate themselves and buy nutritious foods, medicine and clothing.

In the process they have also alerted the villagers to the importance of the environment, and of preserving the beautiful Andean mountain range. Litter is a big problem in this community, but the girls are now using their new-found confidence to talk to other children about keeping the place clean and picking up behind them. They have also shown that recycling can produce a profit. It would be hard to find a better example of girl power.

- All profits from the sale of the cards go directly back to the artisans and their families. If you would like more information about 'The New Seed' please contact Dana Platin by email or by telephone in Ecuador at +011 593 2 221 172.

In Defense of Women and Girls

Minaxi Shukla promotes education for life

A world fit for children requires an alliance between adults and children, particularly women and girls, according to Minaxi Shukla, an Indian pioneer in child development.

'Malnourished girls often grow into undernourished mothers, who are more likely to give birth to low birth weight infants,' argues Ms. Shukla, who is a co-founder of the Center for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA) in India. CHETNA works in some of the poorest areas of Western India.

Ms. Shukla is at the PrepCom to advocate for the health and education of girls – a subject to which she has devoted three decades of work. She is being listened to very carefully because the debate is all about her field of expertise, although not everyone agrees with her about girls.

Conservative critics of the Outcome document argue that singling out the girl child is a form of discrimination that penalizes boys. In fact, says Ms. Shukla, many studies and research in India have shown clearly that girls are particularly vulnerable and must be the target for development programs. A study done in 1999-2000 by the government of the state of Gujarat and UNICEF found that 74.7 percent of almost 3,000 girls tested anemic.

Studies also underscore the link between parents and children, and between poverty and health. 'Initially we were looking only at the health of the mothers, but we couldn't reduce the infant mortality rate. There is still a myth that if you give women iron tablets in the first three months of pregnancy they will bear healthy infants,' said Ms. Shukla.

A mid-term appraisal of India's Ninth Five Year Plan found a strong correlation between maternal and child anemic status. Illiterate mothers were found to have higher anemic rates.

But, said Ms. Shukla, anemia is not caused by a lack of food so much as the maldistribution of food. 'Over sixty percent of anemic women in India are anemic because they eat last in the family. They don't share the same right to nutrition as men.'

Poor women and children are unhealthy because they have to work so hard, said Ms. Shukla. They look after children, work in the house and maybe even hold down a job. That is why they suffer from poor nutrition and are more exposed to violence.

Ms. Shukla co-founded the Center for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA) in India with two nutritionists in 1980, after working in India's governmental Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program. Based in Western India, CHETNA's child development program works with children and adolescents in Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh.

Over the last two decades, CHETNA has promoted its message by staging public events and publishing imaginative – if graphic – educational material. The group sponsors fairs, where it tries to educate onlookers through puppet shows and street theater. CHETNA has also written health and education lyrics for popular songs.

In the classroom, CHETNA teaches girls and boys to draw their own reproductive organs, and then to draw each other's. It has even produced an apron which depicts the menstrual cycle.

CHETNA's publications include comics, coloring books, and the Childbirth Picture Book, which depicts the changes from birth and early development to adolescence for boys and girls. 'Eighty percent of pubescent girls have no knowledge of the process,' said Ms. Shukla.

The Indian government has certainly been won over. Since 1990, the Indian government has bought about 40,000 of CHETNA's Childbirth Picture Books, and 15,000 education manuals. In 1992-3, the Picture Book, published by WIN News, was translated into 8 Indian languages. In partnership with International Health Link Worldwide (UK), CHETNA also produces a children's health dialogue.

Ms. Shukla credits NGO lobbying and the conferences of the past decade with speeding the process along. Following the 1994 conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing conference, India launched a nationwide project called Reproductive and Child Health (RCH). 'We work closely with the government because it is the biggest machine and we need to disseminate information.'

Ms. Shukla wants to be able to use the Outcome document in her work, which is why she wants it to be more forceful on the needs of the girl child.

'In the last decade, we have witnessed some progress in girls' enrollment, dietary changes and whole families eating together. But we want to see an Outcome document which broadens the current definition of child participation to ensure children as partners from birth. We need to harness the creative voice of children in development. We envision children making policies and fully participating in development strategies as the world's future stakeholders.'

Children's Participation - How Not to Do It

After the Organisation of African Unity declared an annual 'Day of the African Child,' President Mugabe of Zimbabwe decided to celebrate the event by establishing an annual one-day Children's parliament.

Potential members are chosen by their schools to represent their constituency at the parliamentary session on the basis of a competition in speech-writing and public speaking. Child MPs are allocated two minutes each. Adult ministers respond to their contributions.

The report says giving children the chance to address their concerns to government is an important step, but the children have identified problems in the process:

No clear criteria for selection. As a result the children tend to be chosen because they are headboys or girls, because they perform well academically and have good English. Children not in school are not represented.

The children have no opportunity to hear ideas in advance of the Parliament, and there is a tendency to perceive the event as a competition leading to a reluctance to exchange information.

No training is provided on their role as MPs.

There is no funding for participation, thereby restricting the opportunities for children to undertake activities in connection with the role.

Lack of follow-up. The views aired at the Parliament are not pursued, and the child MPs are unable to play a continuing role as children's rights activists.

No systematic records are kept of the Parliament, undermining any potential for a serious response to be made by adults to the concerns raised. There is no record of past or present Child MPs.

Adults Must Adapt For Children to Participate, Says New UNICEF Study

A new report from UNICEF warns that even if adults are sympathetic to the idea of participation by children, they may feel uncomfortable with the way it happens.

The report, issued recently by UNICEF's research center in Italy, finds that no less than nine articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognize some variation of child participation.

While stressing that participation is still very much at the experimental stage, it makes a powerful case for its central argument – that participation by children produces major benefits, as well as being their fundamental right.

At the same time, says the report, this 'will require considerable – sometimes profound – change in cultural attitudes towards children' by adults. Adults do not always know best and do not always act in the best interest of the child – even when they mean well.

The report also has some advice for how best to involve children at conferences – something that is clearly relevant to the Special Session process.

At last year's Winnipeg conference on war-affected children, the report says children were genuine participants, and planning and preparation were excellent. Media coverage was planned carefully in advance, enough facilitators were on hand to support children, and young people were able to have access to all conference material. Younger participants were also assisted in deciphering documents.

The report also underlines the importance of reflecting children's views in the recommendations. It notes that the conference chairperson at the anniversary meeting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Geneva in 1999 expected children to respond instantly to adult presentations – a demand that is not made of most adults.

- Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-Making by Gerison Lansdown, UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy

South Africa's Children - Still Paying Off the Debts to Apartheid

In the 1980s, concerned people around the world joined in solidarity with South Africa's struggle against racism. Apartheid was abolished. Despite this victory, racism lives on in South Africa and continues to damage young lives, as five South Africans made clear in a conversation with On the Record.

It would be hard to tell that anything was amiss from the confidence with which the young South African delegation has moved through this week's PrepCom. On Wednesday, they went off to have lunch with South Africa's Ambassador to the UN. Twenty years ago, such a meeting – in such a place – would have been unthinkable. South Africa was a pariah in the UN because of apartheid. Today the country is seen as one of Africa's great racial success stories. By way of

confirmation, South Africa has been given the immensely challenging task of hosting the World Conference Against Racism in late August this year.

The South African NGOs at the PrepCom take pride in their country's reputation, but are not quite sure if it is totally deserved. 'We have a good legislative policy regarding racism, but the facts tell a different story,' said Bonakele Jacobs, a 31 year-old teacher who is also Executive Director of the National Children's Rights Committee in South Africa. 'We still have racism. It will take time to get rid of this, because hundreds of years of racism can't be resolved in one year.'

'There is still physical segregation,' he continued. 'Black people live in one area and white people in another, separately. If a black person wants to move into a white area, you have to pop out big bucks. It is also one-way movement, of black people to white areas.'

Education is a key litmus test of the divide. Apartheid cruelly divided South African schoolchildren from each other according to race, doing immeasurable damage to the future generation, and desegregation in schools is a government goal.

Speaking at a PrepCom side discussion on the Impact of Racism, Discrimination, and Ethnocentrism on Children around the World, held on Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Luvuyo Lonsdale Ndimeni, First Secretary to the South African Mission to the United Nations, said that under the apartheid system there had been nine different departments of education, divided according to ethnicity. These departments are now being combined into one, and the system desegregated.

But he also conceded that some of the thinking of apartheid lingers on. 'In a racist system there is a problem of self-esteem, knowing that you will not have the same opportunity as someone else, so children question the notion of their own culture. They become afraid of their own skin color, that there is something wrong in being black.'

This was echoed by Benjy Francis, director of the Johannesburg cultural center Africa Cultural Trust. 'Many people don't understand (that) apartheid is not only physical, but a deep psychological scarring. We need to...develop a new sense of self-worth.'

Economics also works against South Africa's attempts to fight racism, said Mr. Francis. 'While people in South Africa are coming together...we are not in the safety zone yet. We are paying an inherited debt, the debt of apartheid...we think that is a gross injustice, because that money could be used to repair society, because we are a fledgling society, and we need nurturing.'

The South African government is implementing cultural exchange and desegregation programs in the schools. But more black children are visiting white schools than the reverse. 'They're not going to come to black areas just for an idea,' says Mr. Francis. 'You also have to improve the black communities' infrastructure.'

Xolane Hlamapi, a South African high school student, remembered his visit to a white suburban school: 'Everything was high-class – the security, the equipment. But when they came to visit us, they sent police a day before to do a security check. This was instigated either by their principal

or the parents. So they are equating black people with crime. 'When you see a black man, hide,' is the perception of some white people.'

Sixteen year-old high school student Laurence Mokobi criticized an attempt by white schools to be more sensitive: 'We complained to the schools that the schools were not teaching languages. So they began teaching Zulu in the white schools. But the teachers are white, and they can't speak Zulu.' Laurence regaled his friends in the delegation, some of whom speak eight South African languages, with an imitation of the teachers' Zulu pronunciation.

Attempts to integrate schools can also meet resistance from white administrators and parents. In scenes reminiscent of the struggle for civil rights in the American deep south, parents have even blockaded schools. But in spite of such obstacles, our South African interviewees were hopeful. Mr. Francis noted that children in South Africa are interacting with each other across cultures and in a 'warm and respectful way.' Where there are disturbances, he said, they are usually caused by parents.

Mr. Francis also expressed the need to approach the problem carefully: 'We have to be sensitive, not to use a racist approach...but to temper our actions with the same anti-racism that infused our struggle for freedom.'

Bonakele Jacobs wound up our conversation with a note of optimism and a message to the PrepCom. Lingering racism in South Africa is being met with 'a renaissance...a process of self-discovery, rekindling self-confidence, finding a new humanity.'

But he repeated the thought expressed during Tuesday's forum and many other events during the PrepCom: 'We want to see teeth in the Outcome document. It needs to call for practical action.'

'They Feel They Don't Have a Voice'

Over the last week, journalists from the Children's Express Team watched young delegates struggle to define their role at the PrepCom. Here is the report of Thursday's team: Elizabeth Daley, 17; Naomi Rose Stevens, 8; Tatiana Shannon, 11 and Wade Spiner, 11

At Wednesday's youth caucus a group of young delegates walked out because they felt like their voices weren't being heard above the older delegates. To the UN organizers, youth included everyone who was under 25. The Children's Express News Team felt that a conference on children's rights should focus on real children, those under 18.

As young people, we often find it hard to express ourselves when surrounded by adults. They make us feel wrong and stupid. They pass us by like we're not important. Knowing this makes it easy to see why some of the younger delegates walked out of the conference on Wednesday. They felt like they didn't have a voice.

While there is nothing wrong with including people over 18 in PrepCom, there should be special consideration given to kids under 18. We're the ones who can't vote or hold jobs. A 25 year-old

is part of society and is looked at in a different way. They can drink, smoke and run for office. They can leave the country by themselves, live on their own and get married.

We can't. We have so few outlets for our voices. They should give us the floor. Sometimes these 18 to 25 year-olds use our 'youth' label for their own cause. It's like parking in the handicap spot when you're not disabled. They might be children at heart, but that doesn't cut it.

Also, these young adults aren't the best representatives for youth. It's been seven years since a 25 year old was in high school. A lot of things can change in seven years. An 11 year-old obviously has a lot more invested in the education system since he or she is part of it.

Maybe 18 to 25 year-olds were present because they're more mature. True, young adults probably know what they want more than teenagers – they probably even know how to get it better. But when you're younger you are more in touch with your peers. You are stronger because you are part of a group. A 25 year-old doesn't necessarily feel solidarity with his or her peers. Their group does not have one ultimate goal. Their objectives tend to be personal rather than global. Older people get divided by political parties, religion, where they live. (For example, at the conference when differences of opinion were encountered, participants often forgot their common goals and ignored each other entirely. Children never ignore people they disagree with; they argue.) You don't feel that divide when you're younger. That makes those under 18 better delegates.

One of the conference attendees told us, 'Children should be playing outside, not attending conferences where they will be bored.' She was a 'young' delegate. A twenty-something.

While it is very idealistic to think that adults will act in the best interest of children, it is stupid to think that adults know what is in a child's best interest. Forty year-olds might consider a 22 year-old a youth, but a 13 year-old doesn't.

In order to fix problems faced by youth, we youth need to have a conference with each other. Adults can sit and take notes. Let them sit back and listen to what we have to say.

Improving the PrepCom

After covering the PrepCom for three days, the Children's Express teams feel that the process could be improved. Here are some of their suggestions for the June session. CE News Team: Nicole Harrow, 15; Amanda Thieroff, 16 and Shamella Williams, 17 New York Bureau

Most teenagers fall into the category of being careless and carefree because that's what adults think of them. Kids who think their voices don't matter grow up to be adults who don't feel responsible for the crumbling world around them.

But this isn't true for all youths. Some, like the young people here at PrepCom, know they have to be more responsible for themselves and their actions. They take part in their governments and they shape their world.

This UN Special Session is a milestone because it created a way for children to voice their problems to adults. While this is encouraging, there is still room for improvement for June's PrepCom. Here are our suggestions:

Start younger. We think it would be amazing to have eight and five year-olds here. Just because they are young doesn't mean they don't have experiences. Their voices need to be taken into account. If you start early, kids can get more in the habit of speaking up, being heard and taking action.

If kids don't help their world they should get off the planet. Adults can help kids get involved by putting children's rights on the curriculum. It is their duty to have a voice in the UN and government decisions. One of our interviews on Tuesday was with Antoni Kafrouni, the 15 year-old youth delegate from Venezuela. Why can't one of us be a youth delegate from the United States?

Listen to 'regular' kids. Everyone at the conference belonged to an organization and had a cause to push. Why not include other kids? Regular kids have different perspectives and can provide real input. You can't have a select group of people make decisions that affect everyone. Representatives from all ages, races and backgrounds should be involved. If the UN wants more participation they should be responsible for paying for these regular kids to get involved. More advertising. This is important enough that everyone should be aware that these conferences are happening. The average schmo should know about them because it affects them. If they tell people when it's going on before it happens, then people who couldn't make it could email or call in their suggestions. This fits in with the previous point. Advertising is a great way to hear from the voices of the masses. The suggestions or stories people give could be part of a presentation or a display at the second PrepCom. The UN must have video conferencing or satellite capabilities. This technology could be used to create listening stations. An attendee could sit down and listen to, watch or read comments about children's rights from kids all over the world. Their ideas should not be filtered by adults and would give everyone a chance to be heard. More sessions, more often. Instead of a World Summit on Children every ten years, why not hold the event every year? It would allow organizations to keep tabs on each other and keep everyone up-to-date on current trends. If you have to wait ten years to voice your concern or to get anything done, things are only going to get worse. The idea is to take action now.

Reflections From the Street by Nathan Stirling, CEO, Open Family Australia

As a relative newcomer to UN processes, it has been fascinating to observe the maneuverings around the draft outcome document. I suppose in many ways they are no different from any political lobbying process – except that stakes are considerably higher. Not only are children, as the subject issue, universally of value; but the UN outcome document that emerges may well be used as a basis of assumed principles by individuals and groups well into this new millennium.

So is it to be a document of principles, perhaps fairly broad but with some key points of clarity? Or is it to be more of a strategic business plan with many specific and measurable indicators? The tension in the document of trying to be both things to all people is uncomfortably palpable.

The striking weakness in the document from our organization's particular field of interest is the imbalance between the issues affecting young children (0-12) and the teenage group (13-17). For instance, the street children of industrialized countries are completely and almost intractably immersed in a culture of illicit drug use. Their physical presence on the streets may not be forced through abject poverty or the need to work, but their alienation and exclusion from their community and its protective factors such as schools, family and stable adult relationships is no less real. Equally, the economic cost to countries' health, welfare and justice systems caused by this significantly large group of children is staggering. This latter fact is becoming increasingly recognized by institutions such as The World Bank, and the imperative to design strategies and programs that work are being eagerly sought by the emerging new economies of the world such as those in Eastern and Central Europe.

Finally, while HIV/AIDS is a justifiable mantra of concern, the pervasive and equally pandemic use of illicit drugs by children should prompt an urgent call for action. Street children are at the frontline of this concern, and it is disappointing that these important matters merit so little attention in the current draft document. While a focus on infants and young children is vital, the needs of teenagers, and the causes and issues of their exclusion in both the developed and developing world merits equal time and concern.

- **Open Family** is a street outreach NGO with a specialized model of 24/7 support for street children. Open Family provides services in Australia and technical assistance in other countries through an innovative model of social franchising.