



On the Record for Children

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Keep it Dynamic Says Bellamy by Lisa Russell

Carol Bellamy, the UNICEF Executive Director, urged UNICEF's nongovernmental partners not to get caught up in the specific wording of the Outcome document, but to look at ways that its core principles can be implemented after the Special Session.

Speaking at the consultation meeting for NGOs on Sunday, Ms. Bellamy alluded to the time that had been 'wasted' in poring over minute details at the last PrepCom. 'My public plea is let us not lose [the vibrance and energy] in these rooms,' she said.

Ms. Bellamy also said that she sees no contradiction between the old-style UNICEF thinking and the child rights approach. 'I tell you what I think,' she said. 'I'm not very diplomatic anyway.'

Bellamy's get-to-the-point and 'down-to-earth' attitude was welcomed by NGOs. 'I thought she really had an energizing attitude,' stated Deena Bougary, from the Saudi Arabia NGO, International Islamic Relief.' It was important that she talked about what NGOs can do after the session. NGOs are limited unless they get their governments involved.'

Ruth Annis of the Child Welfare League of Canada agreed. 'She is very results-oriented. I agree with a lot that she says and using a framework to increase a commitment to move forward,' she said.

'I like her. I like her a lot. She seems like the kind of person who should be running this organization,' stated Data Allison Phido from the Nigerian communications NGO, African Radio Development Association (ADRA).

After her address, Ms. Bellamy spent fifteen minutes taking questions. She then left the floor to her deputy, Mr. Kul Gautam.

Gautam laid out a very detailed outline of what participants can expect at the Special Session. He also gave the names of some of the notable delegates who will be attending, including Mrs. Kofi Annan and her fellow 'First Spouses,' Nelson Mandela, Graca Machel, Olympic athletes, Nobel prize winners and goodwill ambassadors.

Mr. Gautam said that a special guest would be coming from the private sector – Bill Gates. 'We hope he comes with a checkbook,' he said with a chuckle.

NGO Anger as 'Progressive' Western Governments Weaken Under-18 Recruitment Ban by Rachel Watson

In a move that could seriously weaken the global campaign against the use of child soldiers and cast doubt on their commitment to a strong Outcome document, several influential Western governments are insisting on recruiting children under 18 into their armed forces while at the same time professing support for a new protocol that seeks to put an end to such recruitment.

These governments include Britain, the United States, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands.

Contacted by On the Record, several diplomats confirmed that their policy is to allow the recruitment of under-18s while ensuring that they are kept out of active combat. While this may sound sensible in West Europe, NGO campaigners feel that it sets a terrible example for the rest of the world, where children are often fighting on the frontline and even 'peaceful areas' may be vulnerable to guerrilla attacks.

'The whole point is to keep children out of harm's way,' said Rachel Brett of the Quakers office in Geneva. 'As soon as they put on a uniform they become lawful objects of attack.'

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was adopted in December 2000 by the UN General Assembly with the aim of ending the recruitment of soldiers under the age of 18. To date, it has been signed by 80 countries, but ratified by only five. Ten ratifications are needed for the protocol to come into force.

NGOs campaigned hard for the Protocol and they hope it can reduce the terrible impact of war, which took the lives of an estimated 2 million children during the 1990s. But this depends on the political commitment of governments and there are growing signs that even Western governments which profess strong support for child rights are finding loopholes in the Protocol.

The Protocol calls on governments to 'take all feasible measures' to prevent children under the 18 from joining their armed forces. But this leaves open the possibility of 16 year-olds enlisting as long as they do it voluntarily and with the consent of parents, and produce proof of their age. The United States, Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, Bangladesh and Denmark are among those governments who continue to recruit under-18s. But they insist that the youngsters will not be deployed 'on active duty' but merely recruited and trained in preparation for joining the military full-time at age 18. Such a practice, they say, is consistent with the Protocol.

Campaigners accept that some kind of voluntary under-18 recruitment had to be included in the Protocol in order to attract ratifications. But they are deeply concerned that governments are now turning this into a major loophole which could cripple the Protocol before it even becomes international law.

NGOs also fear that this will send exactly the wrong message to governments which are fighting for their lives and draw heavily on young recruits. For example, campaigners are heartened that the Democratic Republic of the Congo has announced ratification of the Protocol. But the DRC is also the scene of Africa's largest, and most bloody war. When their survival is at stake, such governments could be tempted to exploit any exceptions to the Protocol.

Ms. Brett also referred to the war in Colombia, where child soldiers have been widely used and where guerrillas often strike deep into territory that is supposedly 'safe.' The heartland of Israel is also vulnerable to suicide bombers. In such situations, she said, anyone in a uniform may be a target.

Campaigners are particularly angered at the policy of Britain. In March 1999, Amnesty International reported that almost 10,000 under-18s had been recruited into the UK armed forces over the previous year – and that under-18s made up one third of new recruits.

The UK government has entered an 'interpretative declaration' in advance of ratifying the Protocol, and this is expected to become a formal reservation when Britain ratifies. But NGO campaigners are afraid that the reservation will be so broad as to be fundamentally at odds with the basic principle of the Convention.

'[The declaration] sets out what the British government understands the article to mean. It is so sweeping that it would render the whole thing meaningless,' said Rory Mungoven, the Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. 'We would rather they did not ratify it at all than ratify it with that kind of language. It's sending a bad signal to everyone else.'

Holland also appears to be exploiting the loophole. The Netherlands is looking at introducing a possible 'study contract' where school-leavers could join the armed forces at 17 but would not be incorporated into active units until they reached 18. The Dutch government is keen to avoid losing out on the thousands of possible recruits who finish school at 16 or 17 and who might otherwise take up other careers.

Britain's policy has angered other European governments which strongly support a complete and unconditional ban on the recruitment of under-18s. Some are said to be exploring the possibility of taking legal action against the British government, under the European treaties.

Youth Representative Insists on Child Participation **by John Meyers and Nazli Kfoury**

Young people must be given the chance to participate in the international debate on children's issues, a 16-year-old from Tanzania told the NGO consultation on Sunday.

'In every issue that concerns us, we should participate,' said Faraja Kotta, speaking on behalf of the under-18 representatives at the third PrepCom. 'We should get out there and get our views heard. But we can't get out there without your support.'

Faraja is not simply attending the PrepCom to address children-specific issues. She told On the Record that she is also interested in education, poverty and HIV/AIDS. Faraja has personal experience with the issue of HIV/AIDS. The AIDS disease, which remains an epidemic throughout Africa, has taken the lives of her uncle, as well as many other relatives.

Faraja believes that the problems facing different nations are similar, and what she learns from other delegates this week will help her when she returns to Tanzania. 'I need experiences from other places to know what I can do for my country and myself,' she said. On the Record talked to Ms. Faraja after she spoke to the panel.

To conclude her remarks before the panel, Faraja re-emphasized the importance of active child participation. 'We have got to get the chance to participate,' she said, 'because you all know that the future of the world lies in our hands.'

Viewpoint: Listen to Us **by Lydiah K Bosire**

Lydiah Bosire, 23, comes from Kisii Kenya. She is the Co-Founder of Youth Against AIDS (YAA), a network of young people which seeks to mobilize and empower young Africans in the campaign against AIDS. Lydiah will be writing regularly for 'On the Record for Children' during this PrepCom.

My name is Lydiah. As a young person from Kenya, I'm here to voice the concerns of young people around the world who are at risk of HIV infection because of irrelevant policy-making concerning youth and AIDS.

My organization, Youth Against AIDS (YAA) originated from an international Forum2000 conference that I attended in 1999. In a session where world leaders were discussing the visions and challenges of development, there was no mention of AIDS.

How can this be, when I have lost a cousin to AIDS? When I know friends and neighbours who are infected? When a third of the youth in my province in Kenya are HIV-positive? There was a need for action then, and YAA was born.

The commitment of the global community to combat HIV/AIDS in youth has been timid. One of the main problems is that young people are not involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of AIDS conventions, declarations and policy.

How many recommendations made by young people are actually incorporated into any document where youth are a key group? And how much 'youth participation' is actually a token representation? There is nothing token about the alarming statistics of youth infections. These are actually daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, neighbours and friends, and not just numbers.

I often hear reference to the importance of youth involvement in fighting AIDS, yet there are no steps taken to ensure such involvement. I believe that the most crucial step toward achieving results from the long overdue 'break the silence' campaign will be to break the obsolescence in the making of youth AIDS policy.

Consider the abstinence-only AIDS prevention policy embraced by many conservative blocs. At a recent meeting before the UNGASS (UN General Assembly Special Session) on AIDS, some delegations expressed disapproval at tactics of prevention which focus on sexual education and condom use.

The reaction of African youth on the African Development Forum's e-mail discussion to these standpoints was very strong. Many young people expressed shock that in this day and age, policy makers think we are too young to learn about safe sex, but not too young to die of AIDS.

Why is my generation dying over a war between abstinence-only and condom use?

If the young people I know and work with were involved in this process, they would strongly reject this approach. We share a common belief that there is a false dichotomy here that has been created by the disagreement between the religious establishment and liberal NGOs. Safe sex and abstinence are, in fact, two ends in the same continuum of AIDS prevention policy options.

We are not dismissing the importance of abstinence, but rather advocating for the right to be informed so that we can have safe alternatives.

I believe it is paradoxical that in attempting to protect our youth from early sexual activity, we are handing them a death warrant. The reality of youth in the 21st century is such that we live in a world very much unlike that of the generation who are driving our policies.

We need ownership of the decisions that affect our futures. We cannot continue to sign off generations because of myopic and archaic policy-making. AIDS information to youth is a vital right, and all policy should reflect that, otherwise ours is a losing battle.

Under-18 Organize and Participate, But Without Forming a Caucus by Jeremy Weissman

UNICEF and its NGO partners are trying to provide an opportunity for children under the age of 18 to participate at this session of the third PrepCom, without forcing them to form a lobbying caucus that could tie them up in bureaucracy and create political fallout.

UNICEF and NGO officials agree that not having a youth caucus may make it harder for under-18s to speak with an official voice. But, they say, they will also be freer to represent their own positions and reflect the diversity of their background in other caucus meetings. 'Young people should not be expected to speak with a single voice,' said Clare Feinstein from the Save the Children International.

This is considered particularly important because so many young people are attending this PrepCom. 210 under-18 representatives pre-registered with NGOs, in addition to 33 others from thirteen different government delegations, according to Jeanette Wijnants of UNICEF.

This represents a threefold increase from the 80 under-18s who met before the last PrepCom. This meeting evolved into a caucus, which subsequently fractured when a large group of over-18 delegates took it over, forcing some of its original members to withdraw.

UNICEF, together with the under-18 task force of the NGO Committee on UNICEF, has been keen to avoid a repeat experience. Over 100 young delegates attended a 2-day workshop this weekend, which was organized by UNICEF and several NGOs.

The workshop helped prepare young delegates to participate in all mainstream caucuses on an equal and active level, according to Feinstein, who is Participation Co-ordinator for the Special Session. UNICEF has made available the basement of UNICEF House for the use of under-18s, to provide young delegates with a space of their own. It will remain open throughout the week as a parallel forum.

Following role playing and orientation activities on Saturday, the young participants (who were aged seven to seventeen) shut the doors of the Labouisse Room on the adult world. Rules posted inside the chamber called for 'equal opportunity for all,' as well as respect and participation. Adults entered only to give support, or to help with organization or translation.

In spite of this, it could still be difficult to give young delegates a voice in the mainstream debate. Organizers of the youth workshop expressed concern to On the Record that children are often patronized or 'put on display' during debate, with little regard given to the merits of their arguments.

'Our experience from the second PrepCom is that they are prepared,' said Annette Giertsen of Save the Children, and a member of the task group organizing the workshop. 'In many cases they are as well prepared as the adults.'

Many of the under-18s from NGOs have also participated in government process at the local or national level – some in direct consultation with heads of state.

Thirteen government delegations have included 33 under-18 representatives at this PrepCom. This is a substantial step up from the seven delegations who brought under-18s to the last PrepCom.

This figure does not account for the delegations carrying young representatives between 18 and 24. The UN defines a child as 18 years of age or younger.

Don't Prolong the Drafting, Urges Durrant by On the Record Staff

Negotiations on the draft Outcome document should come to a close by the end of the PrepCom, so that governments and NGOs can focus on the Special Session in September, according to Ambassador Patricia Durrant from Jamaica.

Ambassador Durrant chairs the PrepCom Bureau of five governments which is drafting the controversial Outcome document, and she spoke Sunday to the day-long NGO consultation meeting. 'It's important that we complete our work,' she added.

NGOs had expected to hear this from Ambassador Durrant, but it left many with mixed feelings. Some feel strongly that the Outcome document needs more work and that it does not say nearly enough about issues like child labour, reproductive health, and adolescents.

Others agree with Ambassador Durrant that if the negotiations are not completed by the end of this week, the entire process could begin to unravel, taking with it the strongest provisions in the Outcome draft. That would play into the hands of right-wing critics.

Perhaps aware of their concerns, Ambassador M. Patricia Durrant spoke out strongly in favour of the Global Movement for Children, which many hope will help to mobilize grassroots support for ten key rallying points. 'It's time for us to bring about a global movement,' she said.

Ambassador Durrant also highlighted the recent report from the UN Secretary General, entitled 'We the Children.' Based on nation reports from about 150 countries, this report is a reminder that the work of NGOs is making a difference and that it will continue into the future.

Arab NGOs Disagree Over Reproductive Health by Rachel Watson

Arab NGOs and their governments are still plagued by disagreements over the treatment of sexuality and morality issues in the Outcome Document.

This emerged in discussions after a presentation of the Middle East and North Africa perspective at the consultations for NGOs on Sunday.

The formal address to the consultations was given by Essam Ali, an Egyptian NGO activist who is also prominent in the NGO Coalition on the Rights of the Child. Later, Mr. Ali told On the Record that reproductive health, sex education and early marriage are 'the critical issues.'

This is not the view of delegates from the Gulf States, who have been particularly insistent on maintaining what they refer to as 'Islamic family values' in the Outcome Document. They are worried about efforts to beef up references to sex education and reproductive health rights for adolescents.

'I disagree completely with the child's right to have access to contraception,' said Arwa Al Deram, a Yememi delegate from the Society for the Development of Women and Children. 'We should tell them that they are not supposed to have sex until you get married, that would prevent HIV and STDs.'

Deena Bougary, a Saudi delegate from the Islamic Relief Organization, said she was keen to see the Outcome Document reflect identity, religion and moral upbringing. Bougary cited a leaflet put together by Saudi youth groups called 'A World Fit for Children: An Islamic Perspective.'

'We've pointed out some of the things [in the Outcome document] that do not go side by side with the Islamic Perspective,' she said. 'For example the document would be against the marriage of a 16 year-old girl. But under Islam this is permissible, because childhood stops at the age of 15.'

Essam Ali was quick to point out that not all Arab NGOs or children share the view of their governments. 'In Egypt, when we get in direct contact with girls, even when they are illiterate, they want information about reproductive health,' he said.

In his open address to the NGOs, Mr. Ali expressed disappointment that Arab civil society had not been able to meet with governments in the run-up to the PrepCom.

Children's Express: In Their Own Words...

Founded in 1976, Children's Express is an international NGO that gives meaning to Article 12 of the convention on the rights of the Child, which calls for broad and active child participation.

Children's Express gives young people an introduction to journalism in arenas normally reserved for professional writers. Its stories are researched, reported and edited by more than 750 CE reporters (age 8-13) and teen editors (age 14-18) from CE news bureaus in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan.

Their work has been published in mainstream adult media, and carried in print and online across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. CE reporters and editors have appeared on television venues worldwide, and on National Public Radio, Public Radio International, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corp. and Voice of America. CE's award-winning website has become the destination of choice for adults and young people who care about the voices and perspectives of young people.

Several young journalists from Children's Express wrote for 'On the Record for Children' at the last PrepCom. They met every deadline, and produced well-written, hard-hitting copy. As a result, we are more than pleased to be working again with CE journalists during this session. On this page we introduce two members of the CE New York Bureau, **John Meyers** and **Nazli Kfoury** who joined us on Saturday. Readers will find their story on the front page.

Our team is keen to involve as many young journalists as possible in this publication. With this in mind, we will be holding a daily 'hands on' workshop for young journalists attending this PrepCom. Contributors are invited to contact the newspaper.

Nazli Kfoury, 15, comes from New York. She goes to the School of the Covenant of the Sacred Heart, and writes from her school newspaper, which is called the '91st Street Spirit.' She has written about such topics as genetically engineered food, the Girls Education Mentoring Service, and common teen prescription medication. Her mother is a photographer for UNICEF, so she knows about the United Nations and what it is trying to do for children.

'As the daughter of a UNICEF photographer, I have had the opportunity to accompany my mother on several photo assignments all over the world. I have been exposed to poverty and struggle from a young age. The places I visited as a child helped me grow up with an awareness of the world around me not common among children my age.

My interest in news has continued to grow, and last October I found myself searching for a journalistic organization that would allow me, as a child, to voice my opinions freely. I found Children's Express through UNICEF and since I joined I've been able to share my views and knowledge with my community.

As a young journalist, I am often dismissed as 'just a child'. It is important for children to be involved in journalism not only for their personal experiences, but also because of their ability to deliver the news with a fresh perspective. Children have the ability to ask blunt questions which adults would not dare ask, which aids them in getting information not otherwise attainable by adults.

John Meyers, 13, is from Demarest, New Jersey. He goes to Riverdale Country School, and contributes to his school paper, the Riverdale Review. Otherwise known as 'Dr. John,' he has written about alternative educational models, gender tensions among pre-adolescents, and children's health issues.

'Journalism is a necessary way of relaying important information. While working in this field, you inform other people of what is going on and at the same time you pick up experiences that will shape your life.

I am excited to be reporting at the UN because it will be a very professional experience. Working with career journalists makes me nervous, but I see that the experience will be a major step in my understanding of journalism.

'Young delegates to the PrepCom are making the same giant step, and we can both benefit from the experience of working with veterans. This is important because in almost every area of child participation, children are not taken seriously.'