

The serious business of children

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Distinguished Guests

Good afternoon. I am humbled, honoured and, frankly, a bit apprehensive to be here with you today. Humbled, as my predecessor in presenting this lecture, His Highness the Aga Khan, noted, to be joining a long list of incredibly distinguished former lecturers; honoured to be invited to celebrate the intellectual and moral legacy of Alec Peterson; and apprehensive as I am beginning to more fully comprehend the enormity of trying to fill the extraordinary “shoes”, as they say, of Monique Seefried as I assume the role of chair of the IB Board of Governors. I would ask you to join with me then in taking a moment to pay tribute to the dynamism and leadership of Monique.

A friend asked me as I was nearing the end of my 10 years with UNICEF if, given the option, I would have wanted to run the World Bank instead of UNICEF—that is, to have spent my 10 years spurring on economic growth rather than taking care of kids. Actually, I responded, World Bank commitments are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a sustainable future. That end can only be reached by assuring that all of the world’s young actually experience childhood as a distinct “sacred” period of human life.

I mean, by “sacred”, the provision of time and safe space for children to acquire, through practice and precept, information and skills necessary for mastering their environment, before being burdened by the responsibilities, pressure and risks of adulthood.

I have entitled my presentation to you “The serious business of children” because there is nothing more serious than children and their health, education and well-being. While I will reflect before I conclude on what and how we are doing, I would like to begin instead on why the struggle to make a world “fit for children” matters, and why I believe that we must reach this end or forfeit a sustainable future.

Let me be clear. I am not talking about the self-evident fact that a species has to reproduce itself or die out. Indeed, I suggest that, if all we do is replace one generation with another formed exactly the same way, we will ultimately reach an evolutionary dead end. Rather, if you will, we need to see, as Wordsworth taught us, that children are not only the creatures of their parents, but the creators of their future mature selves.

Indeed, the animating principle of the world's most widely ratified international treaty, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is that helping children grow up physically and psychologically well, literate and curious, confident and comfortable, wisely guided, nurtured and respected is what will prepare them to live as peaceful cooperative adults. So prepared, and only so prepared, can they become the stewards we need for the human enterprise on which we are embarked. In the words of Adlai Stevenson, then US Ambassador to the UN, "we travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, depending on its vulnerable resources of air and soil, committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work and I will say, the love we give our fragile craft."

Today, Stevenson's formulation seems less a metaphor and more a fair description of our actual physical circumstances. It is commonplace to traverse oceans in hours; connect instantaneously by cell phone or SMS across continents; see in near real time the damage a tsunami or hurricane wreaks and the horror and blood of bodies shattered by bombs and bullets; even measure with some precision climate change on one hemisphere attendant on the flapping of a butterfly's wing on another.

So if we equip our children with better skills and greater ease in managing such a world, our journey should be easier and our vessel less likely to founder, as it does too frequently now, on the hard rock of old habits of thought; the persistence of fear and anger and distrust; the poison of sectarian prejudice; and the perverse refusal to acknowledge the unavoidable, searing consequences of continuing to tolerate poverty, sanction sword-rattling and justify wasting the globe's non-renewable resources.

Even now, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child's significance is more rhetorical than real, it is becoming harder to obscure the bankruptcy of the idea that we can usefully step off Earth's spaceship with its resources held closely to one or two nations' chests or effectively seize control of the ship's direction and contents by subjugating or terrorizing our fellow passengers.

More than hope or logic or my own personal experience disposes me to believe that, so long as we keep on trying, we will be able to fare both forward and well. Rather, what confirms me in this conviction is what has already happened. We have ships travelling to stars beaming back information to Earth's scientists. We have created international organizations that address global problems, albeit imperfectly and at a glacial pace. And almost every nation in the world has bound itself to a universal set of rules and goals for all our children. Indeed, for me, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the primary evidence and outcome of a continuing transformation of human behaviour and opportunity made possible by the relatively recent invention of the idea of childhood. Before that idea seized our imaginations, children were simply marginal, fungible, background elements of the landscape of human existence. After, they occupied their own discrete and important part of the territory, opening their and our horizons.

While no bright line divides the moment before and after there was an idea of childhood as sacred space; while no straight line can be drawn before and after children were understood to be qualitatively and developmentally different from, not merely mini versions of, adults, there are events and circumstances we can recite that help us sketch the nature and process of this profound transition.

As John Boswell explained in the *Kindness of Strangers*, "of all social groups which formed societies of the past, children, seldom seen and rarely heard, are for historians the most elusive, the most obscure". Indeed, fossil remains of ancient and medieval populations are almost entirely of adults; children either left impressions too fragile to survive or no imprints at all.

When they did survive, through the 18th century, children were commonly abandoned by parents to brothels and the elements, to church orders or, after the 13th century, to foundling houses in some of

which the mortality rate, after only a short stay, reached 90%. And until the 18th century, children who died at home or in “care” were buried in unmarked graves.

Abandoning children was a sanctioned way to regulate family circumstances for both poor and the well-off. Indeed, Jean Jacques Rousseau reported in his *Confessions* that, the better to do his writing, he had turned over each of his five known children to foundling hospitals directly after their birth.

Until the 18th century, children not only worked like adults, they were dressed in miniature versions of adult clothes, not material cut to their proportions. Nor did there exist any children’s literature or toys exclusively designed to challenge children’s minds or excite their wonder.

Even through the 19th century, children who were not abandoned in infancy or orphaned could be apprenticed to harsh masters, compelled to sustain themselves and their families in factories and on farms or committed by the state to languish in adult poor houses and mental institutions and penitentiaries.

The movement to find age-appropriate home-like settings for orphaned and abandoned children found its voice in America only in 1853, when the reverend Charles Loring Brace established the Children’s Aid Society. The Society sponsored the Orphan Train that transported 150,000 children to foster family Christian farms in the Midwest.

The English incarnation of this movement was the Children’s Society founded by Edward Rudolf. In 1881, he established in Dulwich the first of a series of family group cottages where 10 children from age 5 to 14 received the loving and secure parental attention they needed to allow them to become a part of the productive society.

In the United States again, in the mid 1880s, after the lawyer and future Illinois Governor John Altgeld toured Chicago prisons to find tiny children sharing the cells of hardened, adult felons, he and a group of progressive women reformers, including Florence Kelly and Jane Adams, began agitating for a separate juvenile justice system. In 1898, they succeeded in opening the first separate court for children whose focus was not the crime but the youth charged with it, on the belief that at a tender age, culpability was low and amenability to correction and changed behaviour through education substantial. Such court systems were replicated worldwide by around 1910.

Again, in 1875, a New York city charity worker, needing to rescue a filthy, horribly beaten girl named Mary Ellen from the home of her violent custodians, was forced to bring the child to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals because no other agency existed to intervene on her behalf. Thereafter the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children was created and chapters established, within two decades, all over the United States and Europe.

During this same period, the last decade of the 19th century and the first of the 20th century, progressive female leaders also began lobbying for and drafting laws to provide compulsory education and protect against exploitation of children’s labour.

To sum up then, until the latter part of the 19th century, however much individual boys and girls may have been nurtured and cared for by their families in the private sphere, children as a class were the voiceless chattel of their parents or guardians; and, in the public sphere, individuals could be worked and sexually exploited for profit, the age of consent presumed to begin at least at 10; and; once older than 7, criminally prosecuted and incarcerated as if they were fully grown.

Expected to do what adults did, but weaker and more vulnerable, European and American children were used and abused in ways that fully justify Lloyd deMause's claim that childhood was a "nightmare from which we are only beginning to wake".

Of course, it is true that adults also experienced and experience poverty and sexual and physical exploitation and untreated, though curable, illness and illiteracy and backbreaking work. Consequently, one can properly argue that nightmarish conditions have been the common lot of all human beings for much of history—and in many parts of the world and in most marginalized communities unfortunately still is—but from which all afflicted people need to and are in some sense beginning to wake.

Acknowledging this, however, does not in any way detract from the instrumental value of focusing on children first. We do not dictate the course of evolution and, even with the best will, too many actors exist for us to expect to develop an anticipatory, fully unified social policy for change. But we are not powerless to take any action that might have exemplary effects.

Considering that all of us begin our human journey at the point of birth, what happens in the early years of our existence has extraordinary resonance for the course we later follow. We have, then, logically, our best, clearest chance of defeating nightmare conditions if we focus our efforts and resources on the period when the human psyche and body are still in process of being formed and shaped.

The evolution of the concern for child welfare only took place in the 20th century. After a series of international instruments of non-legally binding character and many years of discussions and debates regarding the status of children and their need for priority care, as I noted earlier, in 1989, the protection of the child's rights was finally consolidated with adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN General Assembly and its entry into force on 21 September 1990.

And there was more. In 1990 at the World Summit for Children an unprecedented number of world leaders expressed their commitment to children, proclaiming that "there can be no task nobler than giving every child a better future". Ten years later the world's leaders met in the Millennium Summit, committing to the achievement of key development goals (MDGs) that are of direct concern to children. In 2002, at the Special Session on Children, heads of State and Government pledged to advance the protection of children's rights and implement a time-bound strategy to improve the situation of children's rights, in particular to promote healthy lives, provide quality education, protect children from abuse, exploitation and violence, combat HIV/AIDS and mobilize resources for children. A high level review of the Special Session on Children was held in 2007 and reaffirmed this shared commitment to children. 2007 also marked the 10-year review of the Machael Study on children in armed conflict, an agenda of worldwide concern.

At the core of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, and underlying the themes of the Special Session, are the challenges of poverty and exclusion. Poverty and social exclusion compromise the enjoyment of the human rights of children and hamper children's healthy growth and well-being. They determine children's experience of daily life and have a cumulative and lasting impact on their development and future. In many regions, North America and Western Europe included, children are at a higher risk of becoming poorer than adults—sometimes the risk is twice as great. While being dependent on their families for their care and protection, children are particularly dependent on public policies to overcome marginalization and deprivation.

How much progress have we achieved for children? There is no question that over the last several years, important commitments have been made to promote, protect and fulfill the rights of children and to

involve them as actors of change. Children have gained a growing visibility in the international and national agendas.

In Europe and elsewhere extensive changes have been introduced in national legislation, in several cases even in national constitutions; ombuds offices for children have been established to voice and serve the best interests of the child, and human rights commissions are providing special attention to children's concerns; high level government mechanisms have been set up to coordinate activities, avoid overlap and promote synergy across sectors and regions; there is today more and better data on children, granting visibility to hidden areas of neglect and giving fact to marginalized children; child rights have been introduced in school curriculums on the primary and secondary levels, and courses have been developed for university education and training of professionals working with and for children.

Despite progress achieved, the lives of millions of children continue to be marked by poverty, marginalization, exclusion and exploitation. While the latest data shows that for the first time ever, since we started keeping global data, the total number of deaths, from largely preventable causes, among children under 5 fell to under 10 million in 2007, the continuing loss of 9 million young lives each year—25,000 deaths every day—is a blemish on human civilization in this day and age.

With the spread of HIV/AIDS, development gains are being reversed—widening disparities and frustrating efforts to reduce poverty and hunger, provide primary education and reduce child and maternal mortality. Every minute of every day a child below 15 years of age is lost to AIDS.

Education is vital to the development and well-being of children and young people. While data from official school records indicate that around 77 million children of primary school age are not enrolled in school, we need to be mindful that evidence from household surveys suggests that as many as 104 million children of primary school age are not attending school. Girls and young women are particularly impacted. Quality education has been shown to enhance their economic opportunities and empowerment improves their ability to survive pregnancy and childbirth and encourage them to adopt healthy practices for themselves and their children as mothers. Yet girls are still more likely than boys to miss out on primary and secondary education.

Children are also dramatically affected by the changing geo-political reality and its impact on peace and security. Children's development will not succeed unless they can grow in a secure and peaceful environment. Today's wars are increasingly concentrated in the most disadvantaged countries and regions of the world. Fifty years ago one civilian life was lost in wartime for every nine soldiers; today it is nine civilians for one soldier. The compounding factors of poverty and war expose children to violence, disease, hunger, homelessness, exploitation and abuse.

In the years since the Millennium Summit and the Special Session on Children steady progress has been achieved on the goal of eradicating extreme poverty. That's the good news. But the gap between the rich and poor is not closing; instead inequalities and disparities are becoming more visible, more exposed and intractable. To illustrate, in the economically advanced countries of Europe children face situations of relative deprivation, exclusion and marginalization as well. During the first decade of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child relative child income poverty rates actually increased in the majority of the OECD countries—and in at least 12 EU Member States.

Thus, in spite of the significant progress achieved, much remains to be done, both in developing and in industrialized nations. The unfolding global financial crisis affecting all our nations stands as a sad and

yet critical reminder of the urgency of our work. Indeed, this crisis gives us an opportunity to test how serious and lasting our commitment to children really is.

Practically speaking, children around the world need concrete action from us, and in the present, because for children time is always of the essence. High-sounding phrases don't feed their empty bellies or keep them safe from rape or provide textbooks or take away their shame in being taunted by better-off classmates or falling behind in school because they have no place to concentrate. Signing on to the Convention then is the bare beginning. Governments have to do more, give more, but we can't expect they will do enough. Citizens have to do more, give more, but we can't expect they will do enough. Still we must press them to act, and we will be aided in that effort by the logic of the demographics.

As I told a business audience recently, more than 80% of the world's population is in developing countries, and roughly half these people are under the age of 18. In our global economy, a majority of a large multinational corporation's workforce will be located miles and several continents away from headquarters. Fifty-nine per cent of revenues of the 40 largest multinationals will be earned abroad and two-thirds of sales will come from other than their country of origin. Bottom line: no one can afford to ignore the education, health and well-being of any of the world's young.

The best news, though, is that what is required doesn't even cost all that much. Indeed, investing fully in children today will ensure the productivity of future generations to come. Take health, for example; research shows that spending an extra \$2 to \$20 on expanding childhood immunization programmes buys an extra year of life for every child involved. A year for \$2. Not a bad investment.

The math is similar when it comes to education. Education provides the knowledge, values and skills that form the foundation for lifelong learning and professional success. I would further argue that quality education, particularly the education of girls, may be among the best and most far-reaching investments of any global development strategy.

So, not only do the logic and pressure of global market activity and the distribution of world populations compel our urgent attention to the education, health and well-being of the young, it develops that we can actually do a lot to improve things by investing less than we imagine. What's needed is not to yield to the normal human disposition to put off today's work until we feel better about it tomorrow. For the children of the world, tomorrow can be too late.

And the other trick is not letting ourselves feel helpless in the face of the magnitude of the overall challenge. It is depressing that, despite our having legally and nearly unanimously committed the nations of our globe to preserve, enhance and advance children's status and opportunities, every day brings us pictures of starving and brutalized kids and the grisly stories of their untimely deaths, in places like Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Gaza and New York City and England and the suburbs of Paris. Almost as bad, each time we turn a page or shift the channel or decide not to send out a cheque or fail to vote in a by-election, in small ways and large, we are, or feel ourselves, complicit in the evil.

So, what are we supposed to do? Don't we have a right to be concerned with our personal needs and the needs of our family? Yes we do. But that doesn't exempt us from caring about the rest of the world. Hopelessness and despair, I find, are often the product of a false syllogism: the challenge is so enormous; I can't do it all; I'll never finish the job; I better not start.

But that's exactly the point. All that you're asked to do is what you can, to begin, to break down the task and find those portions where you can make inroads. Only from a very long distance can we see the

whole path that will be followed. As we are engaged in our efforts, we should take comfort in the wisdom of Dorothea Day, the great Catholic Worker leader; in the end, we gentle the world by little and little.

While acknowledging I am still new to the IB family, let me, in closing, offer the following observation. The IB can, should and must be part of the solution. We know that in this globalized 21st century, children need to be able to solve problems, to be active members in their communities and to be literate. We know that exemplary practice in education is different now than it was even when most of us were being educated. Child-friendly classrooms, teachers who are equipped with the skills needed to allow children to ask questions and find the answers, parents who, regardless of their own educational level, are empowered to assist their kids—all these are needed.

The IB offers something of great power to the future of children around the world. It offers a chance for children to be problem solvers in their own communities. It offers children the possibility to understand the world through the lens of their own communities. It offers children the tools and understanding they need in order to appreciate that as citizens of both their own country and the globe they can help to create a better world.

To sum up, I believe that we really have a chance, by focusing on the rights, interests, well-being and potential of the world's young people, across each nation, to nurture into adulthood, by little and little, a population of human beings comfortable with and excited about taking cooperative control of spaceship Earth. And our job is to keep seeing them and not let them fade back into the landscape; our responsibility is to act ourselves on the principles we ask them to adopt; our gift is to laugh with them and cheer them on and set boundaries that are rational and fair; and finally our promise is, tempering our passion with reason, not to sin by silence when they need us and they are in pain. And never, never, never to give up. After all, TS Eliot taught us that we are only undefeated because we go on trying. And I for one expect to do just that.

Thank you.