

# THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN

SPECIAL EDITION



**Celebrating 20 Years  
of the Convention  
on the Rights of the Child**



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To mark the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, *The State of the World's Children* invited contributors from a variety of stakeholder groups to give their perspective on what the Convention means to them and what they consider to be some of the critical issues it faces in the 21st century. Our gratitude is extended to those contributors presented in this report: Jacques Barrot, Ishmael Beah, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Om Prakash Gurjar, Yanghee Lee, Louis Michel, Awa N'Deye Ouedraogo, Hanna Polak, Marjorie Scardino, Timothy P. Shriver, Javier Solana, Tan Sri Dato Muhyiddin Mohd Yassin, Andrés Velasco. Their essays represent a selection of those available at the time of going to press in mid-2009. The full series of perspectives is available at <[www.unicef.org/rightsite](http://www.unicef.org/rightsite)>.

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# Foreword

A historic decision was made on 20 November 1989, when world leaders adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the UN General Assembly. Since its inception 20 years ago, the Convention has become the most-ratified human rights treaty in history. This is testament to the common understanding among countries and communities that children have the right to survive and develop; to be protected from violence, abuse and exploitation; and for their views to be respected and actions concerning them to be taken in their best interests. Meeting children's rights is not only fundamental for their development and well-being, it is also pivotal to creating the world envisioned by the Millennium Declaration – a world of peace, equity, security, respect for the environment and shared responsibility – in short, a world fit for children.

Much has been achieved during the past 20 years. The annual number of under-five deaths has fallen from around 12.5 million in 1990 to less than 9 million in 2008. Between 1990 and 2006, 1.6 billion people worldwide gained access to improved water sources. Globally, around 84 per cent of primary-school-age children are attending school, and gender gaps in primary-school enrolment are shrinking across the developing world. The fight against the AIDS pandemic is intensifying and yielding results, with steady increases in the number of pregnant women with HIV receiving antiretroviral drugs to prevent mother-to-child transmission of the virus, and growing numbers of newborns and infants being tested and then also receiving the full course of medication to protect them from HIV.

Advances in child protection and participation, although often less measurable due to gaps in data, have been no less significant. In the past two decades, around 70 countries have incorporated children's codes into national legislation based on the Convention's provisions. Expanded international household surveys have, since the mid-1990s, begun to provide regular estimates of several important protection issues, such as child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, and, more recently, attitudes towards domestic violence and child discipline. Paradigms such as the protective environment are providing a firm basis for national child-protection systems. Awareness of and advocacy on child protection issues have increased markedly. On two key issues – children in armed conflict and violence against children – the naming of UN special representatives have underscored that increased attention and determined effort.

The agenda for children's rights is far from complete. Millions of children remain without the essential services to help ensure their survival, reduce their vulnerability to disease and undernutrition, provide access to improved water and sanitation, and enable them to obtain quality education. Many children lack the protective environment required to safeguard them from violence, abuse, exploitation, discrimination and neglect. The problem of violence against children is particularly alarming, with between 500 million and 1.5 billion children estimated to experience violence annually. Its consequences are pernicious, with many child victims experiencing long-standing physical and mental health difficulties later in life.

The continents of Africa and Asia, and especially the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, have the greatest concentrations of absolute deprivations of child rights and will demand particular attention in the coming years. All countries and regions face the task of tackling the increasingly apparent disparities among economic and social groups in access to and outcomes for children's health, education and protection.

As it enters its 21st year as a UN treaty, the Convention on the Rights of the Child faces the challenge of consolidating the undoubted gains in child rights of the past, while addressing the risks and grasping the opportunities of the present and future. The recent global economic downturn exposes many to greater hunger, undernutrition, lack of opportunity and hardship. Children and young people are most at risk

from this poverty penalty, with almost 45 per cent of the world's population currently under the age of 25.

There is mounting disquiet about climate change and its impact on health, water security and food production; at least 18 violent conflicts since 1990 have involved a struggle for resources.

Increased competition for resources will take place in a world with a burgeoning population, potentially exacerbating inequities in income and access to vital services. Meeting these challenges will require us to unite for children through judicious investment and broad collaboration, with children and women as key partners.

Evidence has shown that investing in child rights is both a responsibility and an opportunity. It is a responsibility because poverty, undernutrition and other deprivations undermine children's abilities to develop to their full potentials. It is an opportunity because the gains achieved through better nutrition, primary health care, education and protection for children are likely to be far greater and long-lasting than in almost any other area of development.

Broad collaboration is vital to the implementation of the Convention's principles and the rights it prescribes. Collaboration in health, education, protection and participation at international and national levels have expanded in recent years, offering the promise of accelerated progress on child rights and towards internationally agreed development goals.

Children's participation empowers them in their own development and protection. Initiatives such as the 2002 UN Special Session on Children, the annual Junior 8 meetings that run concurrently with the G-8 summits, and numerous child friendly cities programmes are showing the benefits of respecting and encouraging the views and participation of children in decision-making forums.

Empowering women and eliminating gender discrimination produces a double dividend – fulfilling the rights of women and also helping to save and improve the lives of children. Evidence shows that when women are educated and empowered to participate in decision-making in the household, workplace and political sphere – secure from violence, exploitation and discrimination – children and families benefit. Both boys and girls are more likely to have access to adequate nutrition, quality health care and education; girls are also more likely to delay marriage and enjoy greater opportunities for development and growth. Educating girls and ensuring their protection and participation is therefore of pivotal importance to the child rights agenda.

The challenge for the next 20 years is to build on the progress achieved, working together to reach those children who are still being denied their rights to survival, development, protection and participation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child stands as a universal standard for building a better world – a world in which the best interests of children are a primary concern of all.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann M. Veneman'.

Ann M. Veneman  
Executive Director, UNICEF

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# The Timeless Relevance of The Convention

On 20 November 2009, the global community celebrates the 20th anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This unique document outlines universal standards for the care, treatment and protection of all individuals below age 18. It is the most widely endorsed human rights treaty in history, currently ratified by 193 States parties.

During the past two decades, the Convention has transformed the way children are viewed and treated throughout the world. It has exerted a pervasive and profound influence on national and international legislation, policy and programmes, public and private institutions, families, communities and individuals. And it has supported marked advances in survival, development, protection and participation across the world.

Despite the numerous challenges that remain in realizing children's rights, the Convention offers a vision of a world in which all children survive and develop, and are protected, respected and encouraged to participate in the decisions that affect them. This vision promotes a world of peace, tolerance, equity, respect for human rights and shared responsibility – in short, a world fit for children.

## *The evolution of international standards on child rights*

### 1924

**The League of Nations adopts the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child. The declaration establishes children's rights to means for material, moral and spiritual development; special help when hungry, sick, disabled or orphaned; first call on relief when in distress; freedom from economic exploitation; and an upbringing that instils a sense of social responsibility.**

### 1948

**The UN General Assembly passes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which refers in article 25 to childhood as "entitled to special care and assistance."**

### 1959

**The UN General Assembly adopts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which recognizes rights such as freedom from discrimination and the rights to a name and nationality. It also specifically enshrines children's rights to education, health care and special protection.**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (henceforth referred to as 'the Convention') was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 2 September 1990. It is the most comprehensive human rights treaty and legal instrument for the promotion and protection of children's rights. Although there are provisions protecting child rights in other international human rights instruments, the Convention is the first to articulate the entire complement of rights relevant to children – economic, social, cultural, civil and political. It was also the first international instrument to explicitly recognize children as social actors and active holders of their own rights.

Under the provisions of the treaty, States parties are legally obliged to fulfil the rights of every child. The Convention

already pervasive across continents and regions, countries and communities, and it will clearly remain the children's Magna Carta for decades – possibly even centuries – to come.

The Convention has significantly reaffirmed and enriched human rights. It reaffirms by applying many of the core principles of earlier international human rights instruments, such as universality and non-discrimination, directly to children. It enriches by consolidating and amplifying the provisions that are included in other human rights instruments, specifying the responsibilities and duties of States parties towards children. It incorporates rights for children that were not widely articulated – notably the right to participation – and stipulates that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions towards them. It stresses that accounta-

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