

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN

1986



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Immunization leads the way

Demand for vaccines has trebled in the last two years and many nations are moving within striking distance of immunizing the vast majority of their young children by the UN target date of 1990. New strategies for mobilizing all organized resources and all possible channels of communication are enabling immunization programmes to reach a much greater proportion of a nation's families. Meanwhile, progress in promoting oral rehydration therapy means that the lives of well over a million children have been saved—in the last twelve months—by the recent spread of two of the least expensive of all child protection methods.

page 1

Reaching all children

ORT and immunization are therefore leading the way towards a revolution in child survival and development—made possible by a range of low-cost methods including growth checking, improved weaning, the promotion of breast-feeding, and the prevention of vitamin A deficiency. But the potential of this new knowledge can only be realized if ways and means can be found to put it at the disposal of all parents. This is the 'social breakthrough' which many countries are also now making.

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The benefits for women

Applying low-cost ways of protecting the lives of children depends, in the main, on the women of the developing world—most of whom already have too long a working day. But most of the basic child survival strategies would also result in considerable savings of money, time, and energy for mothers—and so help to bring about improvements in the lives and health of women.

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The self-health potential

Because it depends on parents as front-line health workers, the move towards a child survival revolution is part of a wider shift in the concept of health care. In both industrialized and developing worlds, the next generation of advances in human health will come about not through more medical technology but through ordinary people knowing more and doing more about their own and their families' health. This process is basic to primary health care, but its potential should not be used as an excuse for governments to abrogate responsibility for essential services and for the social and economic causes of ill health.

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Children and world development

The physical and mental development of children is intimately related to the social and economic development of nations. Today's children must not be made to bear the burden of difficult economic times. Broadly applicable and low-cost methods of enabling parents to improve child health are now available. With present knowledge, and with international support, it is therefore possible to achieve, in the next few years, one of the greatest goals which mankind has ever set for itself—basic protection for the lives and normal development of all its children.

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PREFACE

The range of issues which could legitimately be included under the title *The State of the World's Children* is clearly wider than the focus of this year's report.

In particular, the effects of economic recession continue to reverberate through the world's poorest communities as increasing unemployment and falling real wages bear down most heavily on those who spend the highest percentage of their income on necessities – the poor. At the same time, government cut-backs on such vulnerable items of expenditure as health clinics and food subsidies also leave exposed those who are most dependent on such services – again the poor. As a result, progress for children is being slowed down in some nations and thrown into reverse in others.

Last year a special UNICEF study – *The Impact of World Recession on Children* – detailed the process by which the heaviest burden of economic recession is in most cases passed on to those who are least able to sustain it. This year, evidence of the continuing impact of that process on the lives of the poorest children is continuing to come in (see, for example, Figs. 21 and 22 in the main text of this report).

Most immediately, this crisis for the poorest is surfacing in sub-Saharan Africa where, as all the world has witnessed, the failure of development – and of the rains – has pushed hundreds of thousands of families to the margins of survival and beyond. Because of the diversity and complexity of this crisis, UNICEF has this year published a separate report on the problems now facing the poorest communities, and particularly the children, of Africa.

Such problems have been exacerbated rather than caused by immediate pressures such as recession and

social, historical, geographical, agricultural... But what is required now is not a more refined and sophisticated analysis of poverty but more practical and effective ways of empowering people to liberate themselves from it.

To achieve that means identifying practical starting-points. For the problem is less likely to succumb to a complete and comprehensive set of solutions which have to be realized all at once than to a structured series of achievable goals which, while being important in themselves, also help to lead the way, step by achievable step, towards more comprehensive long-term progress.

To find such beginnings, it is vital to pool the accumulated knowledge of a generation of development efforts and to use this past experience to sharpen the attack on present problems.

In the process, many of those most closely involved are coming to the conclusion that we are now faced not only with great difficulties but also with a very great opportunity. For it is clear that there are now several low-cost and potentially very powerful ways of protecting the lives and the normal development of many millions of children in ways which are politically and financially feasible even in such difficult economic times. The coincidence of technical and social advances which has created this opportunity is relatively new, and its potential is therefore vastly underexploited.

That is why this year's State of the World's Children report focuses on a limited number of achievable aims such as universal immunization, the spread of oral rehydration therapy (ORT), and the low-cost prevention of malnutrition – aims which are relevant to the needs of children now as well as to longer-term goals.

In this context, the reasons for selecting these

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