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ADDRESS BY CAROL BELLAMY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE UNITED NATIONS
CHILDREN'S FUND

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TO THE EUROPEAN MEETING OF MINISTERS FOR CHILDREN'S AFFAIRS

Brussels - 9 November 2001

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Friends, Dear Children:

Poverty is not only an economic issue where children are concerned. For children, poverty often means physical, emotional or intellectual impairment, which can add up to a lifetime of lost opportunity - and a legacy of poverty for succeeding generations.

Poverty is the reason why more than 10 million children die every year before their 5th birthday of preventable causes like measles, acute respiratory infections and tuberculosis; why some 250 million children must work to survive, many of them the objects of sexual exploitation and abuse; why some 120 million children, the majority of them girls, are not in school; and why preventable complications in pregnancy and childbirth kill and disable nearly 600,000 women and girls of child-bearing age a year - more than any other set of causes.

Mr. President, eradication of the worst manifestations of poverty is not only a moral imperative. It is a practical and affordable possibility - and it starts with investing in children.

The Member States of the European Union and other developed countries acknowledged as much when they committed themselves to the International Development Targets on child poverty, education and health. UNICEF is strongly committed to the achievement of the International Development Targets, not only because they are feasible in every way, but because we have long recognised the value of targets and goals for mobilising political will.

UNICEF is convinced that education - especially education for girls - is the No. 1 prerequisite for achieving the International Development Targets.

Only education can put young women on a path to economic and social empowerment; help them make the most of their abilities; and provide a means for changing attitudes about violence while promoting equality.

We know from hard empirical evidence that girls who are educated generally have healthier and better-educated children; that they are more likely to understand what they must do to protect themselves and their families against HIV/AIDS and other diseases; and that they tend to have smaller families.

Ensuring quality education and basic literacy will also open the doors to information technology and the new economy - and prevent the "digital divide" from becoming a new gender divide.

But girls' education is more than a cost-effective investment; more than an economic issue; more than a desirable aspiration that societies should try to provide. Education is a human right, proclaimed by global agreements ranging from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Mr. President, these and other investments in children are not short-term propositions. They require a visionary and long-term commitment. That is why UNICEF has urged ministers of finance, from developing and developed countries alike, to take steps to ensure the long-term future of their countries by putting the well-being of children at the heart of the budgetary process.

At the same time, UNICEF welcomes the ongoing efforts by the European Union to elevate children to a high place on its political agenda, which accelerated after last year's Lisbon Summit - and an informal meeting last November in Paris of ministers for children's affairs.

We are especially gratified by the proclamation, at last year's Nice Summit, of the Charter on Fundamental Rights, whose Article 24 specifically addresses child rights - and by the European Parliament's adoption of a resolution on child protection and child rights. That measure, approved in July, stresses the importance of efforts by the EU and its Member States to ensure that the Special Session on Children supports implementation of all new treaties designed to strengthen child protection.

Mr. President, UNICEF has every hope that the European Union will continue its leadership role by working to ensure that child survival, protection and development be an imperative not just for the children of Europe, but children the world over.

To this end, UNICEF hopes that meetings of ministers responsible for children's policies can be held on a regular basis to monitor the progress for children within Europe as well as outside Europe. The substantive involvement should be maximised and non-European Member States should be allowed to participate in these discussions.

Based on a Report by the Secretary, UNICEF has identified five priority areas where we believe can make the biggest impact on the lives of children. They are: girls' education; integrated early childhood development (ECCD); immunisation; fighting HIV/AIDS; and improved protection of children from violence, exploitation, abuse and discrimination.

In pursuing these priorities, UNICEF will use its global presence, its country programme capacity and its voice to help change the world with children - putting children at the heart of every agenda and finding effective ways to ensure that children's voices are heard.

UNICEF is guided by a vision of the world where leaders commit to use their power and influence to assure, for every child, the rights and opportunities to grow to adulthood in dignity, security and self-fulfilment.