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Children Must Always Come First

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In an inspiring keynote speech, Scholastica Kimaryo, UNICEF representative to Liberia, charted achievements since the UN Convention of the Right of the Child 10 years ago and set out the agenda for the start of the next millennium.

191 countries have ratified the CRC since 1989; only two countries (Somalia and the United States) have not yet ratified it. "The walls of silence, apathy and denial that have often surrounded issues like child labour and the sexual exploitation of children have begun to crumble" since CRC was adopted. The stakes are enormous--HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis facilitated by HIV, malaria (which kills 3,000 children a day in Africa alone); the proliferation of armed conflict which has uprooted 22 million people worldwide (80% of them women and children) and many in conflicts not reported by the media; desperate poverty with 3 billion people (50% children); living on under \$2 a day. "There is nothing abstract about human rights--and no limit to what we can do to promote them."

UNICEF has joined in the global drive to eradicate poverty; has stepped up its support for increased immunisation; proposed a global peace and security agenda for children. It has drawn up a new global agenda, drawing from the fundamental question, What are the moments of intervention that will make the most difference to children's health and development (especially for the girl child)? They are that: infants begin life in good health; all children must be educated; adolescents have ample opportunities to develop and participate in a safe and enabling environment.

UNICEF seeks a global consensus on these bedrock objectives. Political commitment on a global scale, and resources to match, are currently the missing ingredient, but we should aim to achieve this in a generation--advocacy and financial support will help UNICEF achieve its 21st century dream that "the best interests of children must always come first".