



United Nations Environment Programme

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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT • PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE

ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPECIAL SESSION ON CHILDREN

AD-HOC COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

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STATEMENT

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

Mr. Adnan Z. Amin
Director, New York Office

Madame Chair, honourable Ministers, distinguished delegates,

It is a privilege for me to address the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children on behalf of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under your capable leadership.

At the 1990 World Summit on Children, Governments pledged “to improve the environment by combating disease and malnutrition and promoting education”, recognizing that, “these contribute to lowering death rates as well as birth rates, improved social services, better use of natural resources and, ultimately, to the breaking of the vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation.” In making this pledge, the international community explicitly underscored that there is a close relationship between environmental factors and the survival, protection and development of children. At this session you will discuss many aspects of the protection of children. I would like to add to your deliberations that in a broader perspective protection of the environment is also protection of children and future generations.

Twelve years since the 1990 summit we know that environmental degradation is a powerful contributor to many of today’s most pressing global health threats. Estimates suggest that up to one-third of the global burden of disease can be attributed to negative environmental factors, such as polluted air, dirty water, poor sanitation, and insect-transmitted diseases such as malaria. The health of the most vulnerable in society, those living in desperate poverty, the elderly and our children is particularly affected. Approximately two-thirds of the global burden of environment-related disease is borne by children. Environmental quality is one of the key factors in determining whether a child survives the first years of life, and strongly influences the child’s subsequent physical and mental development.

Recognizing that the realisation of children’s rights and the management of environmental challenges are fundamentally mutually reinforcing goals, UNEP, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO) have developed a linkage between two intergovernmental reviews dealing with related aspects of the sustainable development agenda - the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, at the end of August. The nexus between health, environment and poverty is one of the key issues being addressed by WSSD. In this context, the special vulnerabilities of children to environmental health threats is being acknowledged in the preparatory process for WSSD, and we are gratified to note that it has also been recognised in the outcome document of this Special Session, *A World Fit for Children*.

As part of our joint efforts, UNEP, UNICEF and WHO will be launching a publication entitled, *Children in the New Millennium: Environmental Impact on Health*, at a supporting event, which will be held at lunchtime tomorrow. The publication is intended to help raise awareness and deepen our understanding of children’s environmental health issues and provide an informed basis for action and practical recommendations at

different levels. We hope that it will inspire everyone who cares about children to take decisive action that will improve both their health and that of the environment. UNEP and its partners hope that it will serve as a call to action, stimulating discussion and intensifying action in the field of children's environmental health.

Clearly, much more needs to be done in terms of raising awareness, enhancing understanding of the linkages, and developing and implementing concrete measures to reduce environmental health threats to children. However, some important efforts are underway, both at the national and regional levels. For example, the special vulnerabilities of children to environmental health threats have been addressed by the Group of 8 industrialized countries, and by joint meetings of Health and Environment Ministers in Europe and in the Americas. An upcoming meeting of Health and Environment Ministers in Africa, which is being organized by UNEP and WHO, will also take a special look at children's environmental health issues.

For the most part, we know what to do: protect children from environmental health threats and protect the environment to safeguard children's health and their future. For this wishful thinking to become reality, consideration of environmental factors must increasingly be integrated into strategies addressing childhood development. Likewise, children's rights and their special vulnerabilities must be fully recognized within environmental management endeavours.

Children are dynamic and powerful protagonists for a more environmentally stable world, and should be encouraged to participate in protecting the environment on which their future depends. In this regard, UNEP is organizing an International Children's Conference on the Environment in Victoria BC, Canada, from 21 to 25 May 2002, at which 600 children will have the opportunity to discuss their role on environment issues and make recommendations to WSSD.

Madame Chair,

We need to think beyond the Special Session on Children and WSSD, in terms of working to implement the decisions that are taken. In that way we can ensure that a decade from now we can look back knowing that we have acted early and decisively in the name of children and future generations.

Governments, the United Nations system, civil society and the private sector must work together to promote safe and healthy environments for children. UNEP in partnership with UNICEF and WHO is fully committed to fostering collaboration among UN agencies, governments and civil society to place children's environmental health interests at the forefront of our respective agendas. For, as stressed in our new report - prevention is the only sustainable solution: a healthy future for our children depends in large part on our efforts to safeguard the environment.

Thank you Madam Chair.