

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Delivered by Ms. Gunilla Olsson,
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to the Plenary of the
Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

It is a pleasure to address the Plenary of the Fourth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Throughout this past week, we have heard over one hundred governments – Heads of State, Ministers – recommit to prioritizing support for the LDCs.

We have seen hundreds of events organized around the Conference, all highlighting what the most important and pressing challenges are in LDCs.

We have witnessed and can now say that there has been a global commitment by all – including member states, private sector, civil society, and of course the UN System – to do what we can to assist LDCs exit out of poverty, build their productive capacity, provide their people with the opportunities not only to survive, but to thrive.

Let us not forget this when we return home. Let us all take back the commitments expressed throughout this Conference, and generate a real change for people living in LDCs, and especially for those without whom there is no present nor future – children.

Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

About half of the population of LDCs is under 18 years of age. These nations are the richest in children, but the most challenged in terms of child survival and development, with the highest rates of child mortality, the poorest access to basic social services -- and very high rates of undernutrition, including stunting.

If children are stunted after the first two years of life, they suffer irreversible and permanent damage to their development. What does that mean? It means that when they will attend school, their undernourished bodies and minds will make it more difficult to learn, with deficits equivalent to a 2 or 3 year loss of schooling. Then, when they are old enough to begin working, their diminished physical and cognitive development can reduce their earning by as much as 22 percent.

This is a high price for a country to pay.

Now imagine 195 million children suffering from stunting in LDCs. That is the statistic today. Imagine the implications for those nations' development.

UNICEF, together with the Governments of Nepal and the United States, as well as the World Food Programme, organized a special event this week on Equitable Human Development: Investing in Nutrition in LDCs. What was concluded? That poor nutrition is a silent emergency that continues to receive far too little attention.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a collective responsibility to protect the rights of children to live and to learn fully. Nutrition security should therefore be an essential element of every LDC's national development plan, as critical as clean water, as indispensable as education.

Mr. President,

While development priorities such as supporting agriculture or improving infrastructure are fundamental, we must also recognize that investing in people, investing in the social sector and in human and social development, is the foundation of any country's development.

In fact, investment in human capital provides a great long-term return on investment. No nation has ever become strong – or remained strong without it. As UNICEF's Executive Director Anthony Lake said during the Interactive Thematic Debate on Resource Mobilization for LDCs, 'investment in the social sector provides more than a "social floor"; it creates an elevator of future progress'.

This brings me to my last, but most important point. Equity.

Despite significant global progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals – from reducing poverty to decreasing child mortality – we are actually seeing disparities widen between the richest and poorest children in many of the LDCs. National averages can hide alarming inequalities.

For many years, development partners have tended to believe that attacking these disparities – focusing on the poorest communities – would be nice, but too expensive and too difficult. UNICEF decided to question that conventional wisdom. In our study "Narrowing the Gaps to Meet the Goals", we found that an equity-focused strategy – meaning focusing investment on the most disadvantaged – is more, not less, cost-effective. It moves us more quickly to the goal of reducing under-5 mortality. In fact, in low-income, high mortality countries, every additional \$1 million invested in an equity-focused approach can save 40 to 60 percent more lives than the current path.

In short, we found that an equity approach is not only right in principle. It is right in practice.

Let us therefore go back home remembering that investing in reaching all children, and especially the most vulnerable children, providing them with the necessary opportunity to grow and develop their potential, is one of the best investments a country and the international community can make.

Thank you.