

## Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF to the World Day of Indigenous People

8 August 2003

It is a great pleasure for UNICEF to celebrate the Day of the World's Indigenous People with you today. Every indigenous child, like each and every child in the world, has rights to health, education, equality and protection. UNICEF is fully committed to improving the situation of indigenous children around the world, and works daily toward the realisation of their rights.

This year, there is a new impetus to address the needs and rights of indigenous children. The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues convened a high-level thematic debate on indigenous children, and UNICEF was pleased to participate in this event. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has decided to devote its annual Day of General Discussion to the rights of indigenous children. Last but not least, UNICEF's Innocenti Research Center will soon be launching a Digest on the rights of indigenous children.

This new momentum is welcome, and adds further urgency to UNICEF's work at country level, where we have a long history of supporting programmes which address the disparities and discrimination faced by indigenous children. As we all know, children are the first victims of poverty and marginalization. But indigenous children face even greater obstacles in gaining access to basic services and protection. Together, we must break this cycle of poverty and discrimination which stunts the potential of far too many indigenous children.

UNICEF's work is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifically mentions the right of indigenous children to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language. All of us in positions of influence at family, community, national and international levels need to ensure that indigenous children are given the opportunity, support and guidance to become their own agents of change, within their world and their time.

In countries with indigenous populations, UNICEF cooperates with governments and other partners to:

- Protect indigenous children from violence and abuse through the creation of a protective environment that recognizes the duties in all of us, at all levels, from parents, to communities, to governments. We call on all to ensure that indigenous children grow up in societies and communities where they enjoy the best possible protection.
- Facilitate social inclusion based on equality and non-discrimination, together with respect for, and promotion of, indigenous cultures. Education is essential in this regard. UNICEF works with indigenous communities in several countries to set up intercultural and bilingual schools.
- Promote the participation of indigenous children and leaders. UNICEF views the involvement of young people as both a goal and a means. In order to help strengthen leadership skills of young people from indigenous communities, UNICEF urges and facilitates indigenous communities to encourage and support the participation of indigenous children and youth, be it through youth organisations, radio programmes, and music or community theatre.

Many efforts have been made, but we are all aware that we are nowhere near our goal to end discrimination, exclusion and poverty among indigenous peoples – especially children. On this important day, we in UNICEF renew our commitment to work together with the rest of the UN system and with indigenous communities towards the respect, protection and fulfilment of the rights of all indigenous children everywhere.