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UNICEF issues global challenge to world leaders attending Johannesburg Summit

JOHANNESBURG, NEW YORK, GENEVA, 30 August 2002 – UNICEF today issued a bold challenge to world leaders attending the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Noting that access to clean water can save the lives of millions of children, UNICEF’s Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, called on leaders to ensure that every school, in every corner of the world, be equipped with clean water and separate sanitary facilities for boys and girls over the course of the next decade.

“Achieving truly sustainable development means creating a world that is fit for children,” said Ms. Bellamy, in her plenary address to the summit. “Something as simple as providing safe water and clean toilets in schools will not just help protect children from deadly diseases- it will keep millions of them, especially girls, going to school. And, making sure children get a quality basic education can help a single generation make a huge leap.”

In her speech Ms. Bellamy said children are every society’s most precious natural resource, and that investing in them is a virtual guarantee to achieving true sustainable development.

“Investing in children is one of the most farsighted decisions any leader, government or community can make,” said UNICEF’s Executive Director Carol Bellamy. “Investment in a child benefits the child, the family and the cause of sustainable development. It’s not only common sense but its based on sound economic sense, too.”

Investing in children yields higher economic returns than virtually any other type of public or private investment. Studies that show an investment of \$1 in comprehensive child development programmes has a \$7 return on future cost savings.

“We all know about the cycle of poverty,” said Ms. Bellamy. “But we also know how to break the cycle. It means investing in the comprehensive care of children, including health care, clean water, adequate sanitation, education and protection from abuse. Healthy and educated children become productive young adults. These young adults later become healthy, educated parents and a true measure of sustainable development.”

Some 60,000 participants, more than 100 heads of State and Government, leaders from NGOs and business, and representatives of farmers, indigenous people, scientific and technological communities, workers as well as children and young people have gathered at the World Summit

on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. They will focus on strategic actions to preserve the environment and eradicate poverty.

One very clear articulation for the outcome of the Johannesburg Summit can be stated in terms of its impact on children: that achieving truly sustainable development means creating a world that is fit for children. Many of the draft commitments of the Summit grow out of the four pillars of action for children that came from the first ever UN Special Session on Children held in May of this year; promoting healthy lives, providing quality education, protecting children from abuse, exploitation and violence – and combating HIV/AIDS.

But as the world meets to discuss the critical issues of sustainable development in South Africa, six neighbouring countries in the region are reeling from cumulative shocks and crises that have put nearly 13-million people at immediate risk. More than six million of those at risk are children, and 2.4 million of them are under the age of 5.

“We must put urgency behind our commitments and action,” said Ms. Bellamy, having just visited three of the six countries affected. “While sustainable development and a healthy human environment will benefit tomorrow’s children, we must also stay focused on *today’s* children as our first priority.”

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