



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
AT THE OPENING OF THE PAN-AFRICAN FORUM
ON THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN**

CAIRO, EGYPT

28 MAY 2001

Your Excellency Madam Suzanne Mubarak, First Lady of the Arab Republic of Egypt

Your Excellencies First Ladies present

Your Excellencies Amadou Toumani Toure and J.J. Rawlings, respectively former Heads of State of Mali and Ghana

Madam Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF

Distinguished Ministers and Heads of Delegation

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Societies

Youths and Children

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Organization of African Unity and on my own behalf, I wish to convey sincere thanks and appreciation to the Government and people of the Arab Republic of Egypt for hosting this important Forum and for the hospitality extended to all of us since our arrival in Cairo. I wish, in particular, to pay tribute to Madam Suzanne Mubarak for her relentless efforts to ensure the convening of this Forum and for her commitment and dedication to the cause of Africa's children. Her inspiring address will, I am sure, enrich our deliberation. I would also like to thank UNICEF for its immense contribution in facilitating this important gathering which brings together a cross-section of stakeholders involved in the welfare and well-being of children in Africa. We are truly appreciative of the cooperation manifested by UNICEF at all levels in the convening of this Forum.

Today, we are gathered here to reflect on the plight of African children within the context of the challenges facing our continent in the new century and the new millennium. Our deliberations are intended to enrich and consolidate an African common position that Africa would present as its contribution to the United Nations Special Session on Children in September this year.

Since 1990, a number of commitments have been made at the international and continental levels on children issues. These include the adoption by OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the World Declaration on Children adopted by the World Summit on Children; and the Consensus of Dakar which was the outcome of the International Conference on Assistance to African Children.

Much has been achieved in the last decade. We have seen serious and sustained efforts to improve the lot of the child in Africa, to achieve goals laid down at the World Summit for Children, and to realize the Rights of the Child. Perhaps, most significantly, our framework for action has moved on.

We are now in the era of the Rights of the Child. No other set of human rights has been so universally acknowledged. With one exception, all African states have acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a growing number are ratifying the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. This is a big difference from ten years ago, when at the World Summit on Children, we were merely making pledges. Now we have obligations. The challenge is to transform the state obligation, solemnly entered into through the collective act of acceding to these Conventions, to the practical realization of the Rights of the Child in Africa.

But we have not come far enough. I hardly need to repeat the dismal statistics about the crisis afflicting the children of our Continent. African children have the worst life chances in the world. And the gap between the survival rates, the education, the development of Africa's children and the children of other continents is increasing. In these circumstances, there is a special responsibility for all of us, especially our leaders, to advocate the cause of the African child at the international level.

Children in Africa are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in many respects. They are among those mostly affected by the HIV-AIDS pandemic, they are used as soldiers to fight along side adults in the continuing conflicts ravaging some parts of our Continent; they are the bulk of refugees and displaced persons. Millions are forced to work to fend for themselves and support their parents. They have no opportunity to go to school and a large number live on the streets with the risk of being abused and exploited. Others are exposed to violence and drug abuse and acquire anti-social behaviour. These children need protection, security, support and love in order to survive and to develop.

Many of the rights that are taken for granted by children in other parts of the world simply do not exist for African children. Far too many children are undernourished. They are exposed to preventable childhood diseases that cause many of them to die at a young age. Our infant and

child mortality rates remain shockingly and unacceptably high. Too many of our children are not in school. In fact it is estimated that by the end of this decade, more than half of the world's out-of-school children will be in Africa.

Africa's children are in danger of being left behind in a globalizing world. While much progress has been made in terms of child survival and development in this continent during the past 10 years, still much remains to be done. And the gap between the life chances of the African child and his or her counterpart in the developed world is increasing. Africa's children need to be put at the head of the world's agenda for children in the coming decade. Africa's children are entitled to the same rights and welfare as children elsewhere in the world.

A major factor that is exacerbating the vulnerability of children in our Continent is the poverty situation in our countries. Apart from incapacitating African societies from providing the basic needs of our children, poverty drives a lot of children into circumstances which make them vulnerable to various forms of abuse. As we now embark on programmes aimed at poverty eradication or at least alleviation, it is critical that such programmes are designed to include specific components which address the needs of children. Similarly, in the process of dealing with the challenges of macro-economic development special attention needs to be given to the impact of some of the adjustment measures on the survival and welfare of our children. In this connection, particular regard should be given to the impact of external indebtedness on our children.

The on-going armed conflicts in some parts of our Continent are a constant menace to our children. These conflicts destroy the chances for the survival and development of children. Millions of African children are now not only victims of war, but too often they have become its principal targets and even its instruments. Children have been compelled to become instruments of war and recruited or kidnapped to become child soldiers. In 1997, in less than a decade since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, there was an estimated 2 million children worldwide who have been killed in armed conflicts, while triple that number have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. A significant number of these are African children.

The HIV-AIDS pandemic constitutes a clear and present danger to the survival and development of our children. While many have died because of the disease, millions are now orphans who are left with no care thus facing an uncertain future. The most agonizing is that an alarming 90% of the half million children born with HIV-AIDS in Africa are those infected through breast-feeding.

The continued use of child labour compounds the predicament of the African child. There are millions of child workers in our Continent, some of them in virtual situation of forced labour. These children are often working under exploitative conditions and they are being denied the opportunity for normal growth and development. Then there is the even more disadvantageous situation of the girl-child in some of our communities. In some communities girls are subjected to early marriages, harmful practices, and roles that deny them their childhood and undermine their welfare and even the potential to excel later in life.

The task of ensuring a better future for African children is therefore quite a profound one, particularly if we take into account the challenges facing the African Continent in the 21st Century. All our social and economic development agendas converge on the issue of children. Investment in children, in their health, education and security, is the foundation of the future of our Continent. This Forum therefore represents the crux of our efforts to articulate a vision for the future direction of Africa. It is our opportunity to underline the depth and complexity of the challenges facing children in Africa, and our chance to set national, regional and international agendas for responding to those challenges.

We must frankly and comprehensively address the substantive issues of child rights and welfare and development confronting us. We must recognize the value of putting children first. We neglect children at our peril. Many of the problems facing our continent today arise from the failures over previous decades to invest in education, in health, and in stability.

Our efforts during the last ten years have not been enough. We need to do more.

We must provide our children with the best possible start in life; the best chances for survival. Our aim should be to cut child mortality rates substantially over the coming decade. This entails a commitment to child health, particularly vaccination against diseases including polio - which we should eradicate - and vaccine-preventable childhood diseases such as measles. But vaccination alone is not enough, we must improve our health systems and infrastructure so as to ensure broad and convenient accessibility. Furthermore, enhancing child survival requires caring for mothers. We must reduce maternal mortality rates, which remain shockingly high.

In the field of education, we must ensure that our commitment to educate our children is met in full. This involves taking the necessary

steps to establish universal basic education. We must aim to ensure that all our children complete primary education, and that gender disparities in education are removed.

It is critical that we take the struggle against HIV-AIDS as a matter of life and death. We should cut the rates of HIV infection among teenagers and reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV to the absolute minimum. We must seek to ensure that our young people have access to information about HIV/AIDS and the skills and resources to avoid high risk sexual behaviour. In this struggle, we must strive for the implementation of the Abuja Declaration and Framework of Action of the Africa Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and other Related Infectious Diseases adopted last month as well as the African Consensus agreed at the Africa Development Forum in Addis Ababa six months ago.

We must protect our children from abuse and violence, including child labour and the trafficking of children. We should attend to the agenda of reforming personal and family laws where they are incompatible with the rights of the child.

We must make special efforts to protect our children from violations associated with war, especially conscription into armies. All children under 18 years of age should be demobilized from armies, and provided with social and psychological rehabilitation.

All measures must be taken to ensure that children are provided with the protection they are entitled to during conflict. We must bring an end to abduction and abuse of children. States should take all necessary measures to limit the proliferation of small arms, and to reduce the impact of anti-personnel land mines. Our countries should sign and ratify all relevant instruments of humanitarian law.

We must promote the meaningful participation of young people in making decisions that affect their lives. We should recognize that they are also agents of change and they should be given all opportunities to participate effectively. We cannot afford to ignore the important role of youth: they represent our greatest untapped resource. This Pan-African Forum for children is therefore a crucial agenda-setting exercise. The outcomes will go forward to national governments, to us at the OAU, and to the United Nations General Assembly. Above all, it is essential that we translate our obligations into action.

Action is necessary at all levels. The first obligation for realizing the Rights of the Child falls upon families and communities. For the most part, our African traditions place great stress on the welfare of children. This is welcome, but of course our societies have been under great stress

in recent decades. There is therefore an important agenda at national and international level to support measures that can strengthen African families and communities.

We must also attend to our customs and laws, particularly personal and family laws, that may be incompatible with the rights of the child. Harmful traditional practices must be reformed or halted, and where necessary, laws must be revised.

National governments have a profound legal and moral obligation to realize the Rights of the Child. It is incumbent upon Member States to draw up plans of action at the national level that can address the many challenges of meeting these goals. This requires effort across all sectors. It requires leadership and a mobilization of resources. It also requires partnerships with civil society, and the international community.

Civil society and the private sector have important roles and responsibilities. It is evident that we can only make progress in key areas such as overcoming HIV/AIDS and providing education, through broad-based partnerships that draw upon the human and material resources of all sections of society.

At a Continental level, the OAU, in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa and UNICEF, as well as other agencies have an important role to play in maintaining a high level of political commitment, and in monitoring the adherence to the promises made.

Africa also seeks an international partnership to help realize the Rights of the Child. We need stable, reliable support from our international development cooperation partners, targeted at the key sectors that can enable us to do the best for children. We need to agree on our goals, and work in partnership towards their realization, holding ourselves mutually accountable. In short we are seeking a compact between Africa and the international community, for the sake of the African child.

Children are Africa's future. All African countries should spare no efforts in promoting children's rights and welfare. I urge African States to reaffirm and act upon their commitments to the various international conventions relating to children. I wish to make a special appeal to those African states which have not yet done so, to sign and/or ratify the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

This is an important moment for the African continent. We can herald a consensus that the future of the continent depends critically on the extent to which we tackle the crises of poverty, disease - especially

HIV/AIDS, lack of education, and conflict. Never before has there been such a willingness to acknowledge the nature of Africa's crises, and summon the political will to address them.

The realization of the Rights of the Child in Africa is an obligation we have set for ourselves. But it is more than an obligation: it is an imperative if we are to succeed in building a better and brighter future for the Continent.

Thank you for your attention.