

African Child Policy Forum

**First Meeting of the International Board of Trustees
(16 – 17 October 2003, Conference Hall, African Union)**

Opening Session

Address

**H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Chairman, Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation
and
Former Secretary-General,
Organization of African Unity**

**African Child Policy Forum
October 16 2003
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

Excellencies
Distinguished guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to make my first public statement as the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the newly-established African Child Policy Forum. My pleasure is all the greater to see the project coming to fruition since I have personally been closely associated with it right from its start. How far has already come amazes me and gives me confidence that much more can be expected from the new organization and the term that has the privilege and the challenge to lead it.

I have willingly accepted the honour of being the Board's Chairperson from a personal conviction in the cause the organization is serving – the cause of Africa's children. In the many years that I have served my country, my continent and the wider international community in different capacities I have been able to witness at close quarters the plight of children in many parts of the world. I am conscious of the agony and trauma that many of them have been subjected to as I am also only too aware of the great potential that if fully utilised could go along way to make a major difference to the lives and well being of million. Unfortunately while all our countries and leaders speak highly of their determinations to make a difference for the children. More often than not declarations of commitments do have not been translated into required action. Yes, children continue to suffer and being deprives. But no where else in the world is this suffering more pronounced than in our continent. African children are the most deprived children in the whole wide world.

A mere glance at three of indicators of the children's state compiled by the Forum speaks volumes of this SAD situation:

- Almost one out of five African children will not live beyond five years;
- One-third of them are malnourished in normal times – i.e., let alone during the famines that are now becoming frequent in Africa; To say nothing of the horrendous consequences of conflict that continue to affect our continent;
- 12 million are AIDS orphans.

From these indicators, the conclusion is inevitable that more action is needed on behalf of Africa's children. And in this connection I believe that the African Children Policy Forum is a welcome addition to the struggle for children's rights and welfare. Indeed the Forum aims going beyond that in claiming a niche for itself in this struggle. This claim is made in all humility, considering our young age; yet it is made with some degree of faith, considering the experience behind its founding members. Cumulatively they count over 100 years of professional experience on children's rights issues and African economic and social development. Additionally, there is experience in the team on matters relating to legal issues – one foot in the campaign for children.

Our team aspires to fill a gap in this struggle. There are many attributes of our organization that augur well for this role:

1. We are Pan-African, and we can thus enhance inter-African links and more easily communicate with our fellow organizations.
2. We aim to look at the "bigger picture" and to bring the bigger picture to the policy arena.
3. We are independent of any affiliations.
4. We are not shy to dream big dreams.
5. We will endeavour to address the multi-faceted problems affecting African children in a comprehensive and strategic way.
6. We plan to provide a regional forum for dialogue on new trends affecting children.

There are in fact TWO other points I should make.

The first is that the Forum has always had a close link with the African Union from its conception – then the Organization of African Unity. I was its Secretary General when Dr Assefa Bequele had approached me for our collaboration and I had happily supported that. That association continues and has become even stronger. Now I see that the International Policy Conferences of the Forum will be held back-to-back with the regular meetings of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The African Union is represented on the Board of Trustees of the Forum. A physical manifestation of the Forum-AU

linkage is our presence in this magnificent conference hall. These important linkages speak for themselves.

The Second point relates to the Programme of our organization. Let me just mention three-four things we aim to accomplish. We aim to establish

- a Legal Defence Centre,
- a web-based Information Hub
- a Training and Information Centre
- initiatives leading to Centres of Excellence in Arts

If only one of these projects came to fruition, it will make an important contribution to the welfare of African children – and indeed to that of Africa. For example a Children’s Legal Defence Centre could by itself help to root out what we are at last recognizing is as much an African malaise as a Western one – Child Abuse.

So we have our job cut out. Apart from guiding this small team of experts in the Forum, one of our responsibilities as Trustees will be to attract funding for our programme. This of course is an enormous challenge which we intend to undertake with vision and determination.

As the Forum’s very informative – and very humorous – Information Brochure says, “Visit Ethiopia and be 7 years younger.” Let us use our unexpected new youthfulness in this great cause!

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues for the honour they have given me by giving me the responsibility of chairing the Board of Trustees. I look forward to working with them and to be included by their immense knowledge, experience, expertise and above all their clear commitment to the noble cause of the African children.