

Prime Minister

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**CHILDREN AT RISK. KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE INTERNATIONAL  
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This very moment a child is born in a developing country. Probably the parents' pride and joy will be mixed with anxiety and fear for the immediate future. The parents will worry about how are they going to feed the newcomer. Will he or she die from malnutrition or disease before the age of five? Will education be accessible and affordable? Will there be any hope for the future?

At the very same time another child will be born in a Northern industrialized country. The parents might make plans for the newcomer regarding family, education and career.

But regardless of how sparse or plentiful are their meals and their means, there can be a risk that he or she will suffer emotional malnutrition from lack of care.

Though there are increasing number of children who are refugees, millions more will not feel at home where they are raised and live.

Though education is improving globally, both the North and the South face the immensely serious challenge that a segment of the young are never fully integrated in the social fabric of their home country.

We do know a great deal about where we have succeeded and where we have so far failed. However, we need to shed more light and exchange experience on how we can truly meet our responsibilities towards the next generations and inspire changes in attitudes, priorities and policies.

It is with this in mind great pleasure and privilege for the Government to warmly welcome to Bergen and to Norway this a large and distinguished group of researchers from all parts of the world. It is an honour and an inspiration for Norway to host this important conference. You are all highly-qualified, dedicated people gathered here to discuss what is closest to our hearts and high on the agenda; the welfare, security and future of our children.

Technological and medical research has provided us with many answers to

how we can secure the health, life and future of children. However, we have not solved the problem of how to safeguard their right to the help that humanity can offer.

In the North, we have the capacity. The issue is one of priority. In the South the issue is one of capacity as well as of priority.

We have not managed to mobilize sufficient political will. The global community is not taking the rights and the needs of children seriously enough. Children are dying of hunger, they are the victims of war, children are being sold on the streets, and they are living as slaves.

Even in the richest countries in the world there are children who are mistreated or abused, who suffer from loneliness, who in desperation destroy their health with alcohol and drugs, or who even take their own lives.

Our worldwide conscience and responsibility should give us no peace. It is an intolerable paradox that we are constantly searching for more knowledge, despite the fact that we cannot make full use of what we already know. There is no end to the various uses to which we could put that knowledge. Nevertheless, we must continue research to increase our understanding and to speak up about the conditions under which children live. No-one must be allowed to claim that we do too little for the reason that we know too little.

There are signs of hope. It is a crucial step forward that the world community has now defined its goals as regards children, even though it is a long way from today's reality to the fulfilment of this dream. The world community has adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a charter of children's rights. One hundred nations have committed themselves to these fundamental rules and to the inalienable right of all children to a safe childhood. The Convention recognizes the inherent human dignity of children, and sets out moral and legal standards, - independent of religious and ideological differences - , towards which the signatories have agreed to strive.

The Convention was a major achievement. It gives hope for the future. While we are still far from realizing the aims of the Convention on a global scale, we do now have an instrument which should enable us to make progress towards a better world for our children.

In September 1990, 71 Presidents and Prime Ministers came together in New York for the first World Summit for Children. The Heads of State and Government committed themselves to make available the resources needed to realize a concrete plan of action. The means are both affordable and available. What we need to do is to mobilize the will to set our priorities

right.

While hope is prevalent in many countries, there are also places where hope is being brutally smashed by the senseless brutality of war. How can any aspiration for political power be justified when it is built on force rather than on conviction. The situation in former Yugoslavia is particularly appalling, where the Serbians in particular are at war also against the children of the region. There by, they are degrading not only their vulnerable young victims. but also themselves who are allowing this to happen.

People who are suffering or who live in hate or fear cannot inspire hope. If we are to give our children hope, it must arise from our own faith in the future. It is faith in the future which overthrows dictators, gives the oppressed freedom and justice, which encourages nations and peoples to reach out to others who are suffering.

The tide of democracy has inspired a great deal of hope in a short time in many parts of the world. Individuals have emerged as leaders to show the way, while the people have rallied behind them to safeguard freedom and democracy. Although there is still much uncertainty and we have seen dramatic reversals of fortune, the changes we have witnessed in many parts of the world do point towards a brighter future.

Moreover, we must acknowledge that many of the mechanisms which ensure prosperity in many countries also contribute to poverty in other countries. It is therefore not sufficient to take part in international efforts to help children. We must be more active to create a more equitable world order.

We must join the fight against poverty and the struggle for a more equitable distribution of prosperity among as well as within the countries of the world. And the last is not the least important. And in many developing countries the distribution is disastrous.

We must continue our struggle against overexploitation of natural resources and degradation of the natural environment. Only if we accept without reservation that we have a responsibility for sound management of the earth will we truly promote sustainable development, and without sustainable development there is little hope for our children.

Education is essential. As stated also by UNICEF, the choices which today's children will have to make in the twenty-first century, whether they be choices about family size or land use, energy source or waste disposal, can only be made wisely by a population which is capable of absorbing new knowledge and capable of responding to it. Such a future population will also be able to judge the wisdom of the choices we are making now.

One of the most famous and effective pieces of public communication I have seen is a British poster showing a young boy asking his father: "What did you do in the war, daddy?" It was conceived at a time when freedom and future were challenged.

Today, the threats to our future come not so much from military aggression, as from our own way of living, from tacit acceptance that poverty and destitution are facts of life, and from shortsighted abuse of resources. We will have to face the next generations inquiry into what we did when we realized what was at stake.

The hole in the ozone-layer will give some of us skin-cancer, but it is our human nature to close our eyes to this fact and to hope that individually we may be spared. But the odds are beginning to mount against our children and grand-children. And if global warming remains unchecked, food-production may suffer, and droughts, storms and floods may upset our delicate production and transport systems. Island states may disappear and hundreds of millions of people living in low-lying areas will be affected. This all may happen because our generation has become to extravagant in using resources over which we have no moral monopoly.

This is why the global conference on environment and development is also of such vital importance to children. Our achievements as regards climate change, the transfer of funds for environmental measures in developing countries and the provision of resources to combat poverty will determine whether we will be able to reverse the dangerous and present trends.

Children will be an integral part of the conference. They will come to Rio from all over the world, bringing appeals from children in 36 different countries. Children and young people are deeply concerned about the environment and development. They know that it is their lives that are most at stake. For Earth's sake, the world will not forget - and our children will long remember - if the heads of state gathered in Rio fail to seize that historic moment.

Compared to many other countries, Norway is truly privileged. We have rich natural resources and we are a stable society which has been spared much suffering. All this has given us security and faith in the future.

However, our situation also entails a special obligation to take children seriously both at home and abroad. We have given children high priority on our national agenda. We are trying to provide them with more equal living conditions and to protect them from suffering.

We have endeavoured to provide secure surroundings for birth and the first

years of childhood. We are concerned about ensuring that both parents have the right and opportunity to be with and care for their newborn children, and about safeguarding the family's financial situation during this crucial and also demanding period.

In our kindergartens and schools, we try to prepare our children to meet the challenges they will face in society. We try to give them a cultural basis and fundamental values during their formative years, so that they can grow to be secure enough to realize their potential and make a contribution in an international society.

We are increasing our efforts to provide for the weakest of our children. They should not have to wait for help. They do not have the time to wait. At the county level, the most important task is to ensure that disadvantaged children receive the help they need.

When the present Government took over, we established a separate Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. We did this to upgrade the matters related to children and to provide for better coordination of policies concerning children and young people within the spheres of responsibility of many other ministries.

Issues concerning children and young people have become an important topic also in regional and local planning. Many municipalities are drawing up separate plans concerning living conditions for children and measures to help them.

We have also appointed a Commissioner for Children, whose task is to act as a watchdog for children and young people and to plead their cause.

We attach great importance to learning more about children and young people. Specific research programmes concerning children and young people have been established. You will acquaint yourselves with The Norwegian centre for Child research at this conference. In addition we have established The Norwegian Institute for Child Welfare Research.

During the conference days here in Bergen you will be confronted with a wealth of knowledge. You will have an opportunity to probe difficult issues and you will emerge with many answers and many new questions.

It is our sincere hope that this will not only benefit your own research, but will also further international understanding of the issues at hand. The conference will be successful if you will return to your countries with new inspiration that can help governments, organizations and professionals who are working to intensify worldwide efforts to improve the situation of children. Ultimately, the beneficiaries of the Conference are children

themselves.

I am particularly pleased to see so many researchers from Third World countries at this conference. It is essential that all countries be given the opportunity to share their knowledge and their insight.

We will not have met our obligations if we do not provide adequate stimulus, care and understanding for the next generations. How we meet our responsibility towards children will decide how justified are our claimed advances towards a higher echelon of social progress. If we treat them with scant respect and not as equal members of our communities we ourselves will be the greatest losers.

That is why this Conference is also about ourselves, and that is why the program for the Conference is like a DNA-fingerprint of the human species with the opportunity for positive change.