



*Check against delivery*

## **Global Human Development Report Launch**

### **Children's voices are important in climate change discussions**

Statement by  
Min-Whee Kang  
UNICEF Representative  
(Banjul, 25 March 2008)

-----

**Your Excellency Ajaratou Isatou Njie-Saidy, VP of the Republic of The Gambia**  
**Hon. Fatoumatta Jahumpa Ceesay, Speaker of the National Assembly**  
**Hon. Secretaries of State**  
**National Assembly Members**  
**Venerable Religious leaders**  
**Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps**  
**Fellow heads of UN sister agencies**  
**Distinguished guests**

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today, on the occasion of the launching of the Global Human Development Report 2007-2008 on Climate Change.

I am sure my colleague from UNDP will elaborate further on the report itself. So allow me to focus more on the impact of climate change on children and what UNICEF is doing to address this global challenge that affects each and every one of us.

The fight against climate change is nothing new. It has been a central part of the UN's cross-cutting development activities to protect our environment for over three decades.

Two days after the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize to environmental experts in 2007, UNICEF released a publication that outlines the concerns of children and youth about climate change.

The publication, titled *Climate Change and Children*, discusses the effects of climate change on children's health and development and it was timed to coincide with world leaders' discussions at the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali.

When young people are asked to list their concerns about the world they live in, one issue that features high on their agenda is climate change. And while we still have a lot to learn about the consequences of climate change, economic and social development cannot be sustainable unless we deal decisively with this issue.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly one quarter of all deaths are attributable to environmental factors, rising to more than one-third of deaths among children under the age of 14.

The three biggest killers of children under five – respiratory infections, diarrheal diseases and malaria – are closely linked to environmental factors. And WHO predicts that deaths from asthma, a common chronic disease among children, could increase by nearly 20 per cent by 2016 unless urgent action is taken to reduce emissions from vehicles and factories.

UNICEF is working with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), among others, to develop a strategy to promote safe and healthy environments for children. This strategy will focus on measures to prevent and reduce environmental risks to child survival, protection and education, while enhancing capacities to respond to the needs of children in the event of humanitarian crises linked to climate change.

While many of the earth's resources are threatened by climate change, one important renewable resource – the power of young people to effect change – is available in abundance. Along with its partners, UNICEF is also developing an Environmental Education Resource Pack to support government efforts to empower children to protect and restore local environments.

Children often suffer the brunt of natural disasters, disease and malnutrition in poor countries, and rising temperatures are predicted to only worsen the plight of the young. For UNICEF this is critical, but climate change is not just an environmental issue. It is economic, social and human. When it comes to climate change, the poor pay more – and children most of all. They pay with their health, development and, too often, their lives.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference was held on 12 December 2007 in Bali, Indonesia. The climate change meeting attracted participants from more than 180 countries – including environmental experts and activists, world leaders and youth – in an effort to reach agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and slowing down global warming.

On the sidelines of this august gathering to discuss how to protect our environment and preserve mother earth, UNICEF supported the launch of a Global Youth Climate Movement by a coalition of more than 30 youth organizations and held a series of events to highlight the effects of global warming on children and to ensure that young people are involved in debate on this issue.

Participants from around the world brought testimonials of their daily environment under duress. One participant, who is a member of the Climate Change Action Group in the Pacific island nation of Kiribati, told the story of how coastal erosion is a serious problem in her country, that storms and high seas are destroying her homeland. She explained that their water supply is under threat as a lot of salt is seeping into their wells, and families are feeling the effects.

Another delegate from the US said that students are acting on campuses, in their states, in their countries. Because they see now that we cannot just build movements within our own countries. We must reach across borders to unite, as world leaders have refused to act with the urgency that we need.

At a panel discussion, international delegates discussed the impact of climate change on children, particularly those living in less developed countries. Uganda's Environment Minister, Maria Mutagamba noted that children are more likely to succumb to natural disasters, as they are born into this climate change problem – trees being cut, rubbish being burned. These are serious issues affecting a child's health and future.

The specific nature of the relationship between climate change and children's health is now emerging. It is estimated that every year, more than 3 million children die as a result of diseases linked to the environment, such as diarrhoeal disease, respiratory infection and malaria.

Protecting the environment and providing for the health and development of children go hand in hand. Actions taken to enhance environmental quality also help to meet the basic needs of children.

As UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said, "This is the moral challenge of our generation. Not only are the eyes of the world upon us. More important, succeeding generations depend on us. We cannot rob our children of their future."

Let me end with a story about a young environmental activist I met last year at an event organized by UNICEF with child participation from around the world.

Fourteen-year-old Maia Azores loves to dance and play sports just like any other teenager, but what makes her stand out from other young Filipinos is her passion for environmental activism. Maia is Vice-President of Friends of Seven Lakes Foundation (FSLF) Youth, an environment-focused children's organization that promotes conservation, protection and rehabilitation of the seven interconnected crater lakes of San Pablo City in the Philippines

Together with her friends, Maia also conducts environmental awareness seminars in schools, tree-planting projects, lake clean-up drives, eco-camps for young people and recycling campaigns. In one recent project, she and other members of FSLF Youth adopted a 20-square-metre stretch along the lakeshore in their home province and successfully set up a children's park.

I was very impressed to hear Maia stress that children have a role to play. She says that if there is a problem you should try to do something about it and not just wait for something to happen.

Maia picked up her parents' passion for nature and set out to save the environment. She did a survey in school on what young people thought our existing environmental problems are. Water and air pollution, garbage problems, global warming and lack of awareness about environmental issues topped the survey.

This is how Maia came to participate in the UNICEF-BioVision Children's Forum from 6 to 10 March 2007 in Lyon, France, where I met her. There, she and nine other children from developing countries met with Nobel laureates, prominent scientists, business people, government leaders and civil society representatives.

Participants addressed issues of health, nutrition, agriculture and environment that face the world today. The Children's Forum participants prepared a Call to Action challenging their leaders to work with young people toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Upon her return to the Philippines, Maia hit the ground running, meeting with national leaders at the Philippine Water Summit to gain their support. She is now working on a new project that involves testing the water quality of the lakes.

In an interview after she returned home, she wrote, "If we push through with our water testing, we will be able to show how much percent of E. coli and other bad stuff there is in our lakes. "Maybe we could get a grant or support from our government for a cleanup?" I am sure Maia would be thrilled to hear about the Government of The Gambia's set settal initiative to clean up communities.

Despite the alarming trend of environmental degradation worldwide, Maia remains optimistic about the future. "I hope that one day I can still see my children and grandchildren taking a shower and drinking fresh, clean water," she says. "I still have hope that if we all work together and do our part we will be able to solve our problems and accomplish our goals."

I hope Maia's dreams will come true. I hope all young people today will be able to share that dream of a world fit for all children for generations to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the dreams of our children are in our hands. As Maia said, let us not wait for something to just happen. Let us work together to protect our environment and preserve our earth.

Thank you for your attention.