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HOW CHILDREN MEET TODAY'S CHALLENGES: A GLOBAL RESPONSE

**The ISS Global Response
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Working towards « A World Fit for Children ». This unanimous commitment taken by the community of the world's nations and their leaders at the United Nations Special Session on Children exactly 4 years ago now, in May 2002, is probably one of the most important international milestone the human community has established for itself in the last decades. I'd like by the way to take the opportunity of Dr. Rima Salah's honourable presence here to thank UNICEF for the central and inspirational role it has played in this UN declaration.

This proclamation indeed puts the children at the right place on the international agenda: at the central place they deserve, and at the heart of the preoccupations of humanity. However, if indeed such a statement had to be made (working towards a world fit for children), that is because children are still at great risks in today's world. Are they less in danger today than they were in earlier years? In statistical terms at the overall scale of mankind and history, probably yes. Development, medical progress, access to education, food security, systems for protection and care are probably better today than they were before. But this is merely a statistical view which cannot be taken as a satisfactory answer. The distinguished persons who have spoken before me have clearly shown that if we look at child protection and safety in further details, there are obvious and enormous differences between the situation of a child in, say, an industrialized country, and his or her alter ego in Africa, some areas of Asia or Central America for instance. In other words, looked at on a more individual basis, indeed there are huge parts of the world's childhood still at great risks, in a vulnerability which definitely demands an unflinching mobilisation of the whole international community, at all levels.

Which risks, which endangering situations are today most threatening for children? Let me just take a few minutes to build up a picture of some of the trends crisscrossing our world and their potential consequences on children:

- A world in a never-seen-before globalisation process, leading to 1) huge migratory patterns disrupting, destroying the primary "security cell" of children – the family; 2) underground phenomena which can – most unfortunately – more easily take place and are responding to the most dubious needs of some: child prostitution, child trafficking, child exploitation, child labour...; 3) hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied minors seeking an illusionary better future in unwelcoming foreign states;
- Huge pandemics, such as AIDS of course, leaving in its decimating trail scores of orphans from one or both parents – according to UNAIDS, there are almost 15 million (twice the population of Hong Kong!) such children in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the

Caribbean, not to mention – although it is often forgotten – those victims directly or indirectly of other deadly diseases such as malaria (the killer #1 in Africa);

- Increasing contrasts between a very little number of wealthy countries raising even higher their boundaries as fortresses walls against undesired immigration, and a vast majority of poor ones, hugely indebted, with hardly any resources or even hopes of getting one day sufficient state resources, giving even more room to an augmented vulnerability of the weakest ones
- A general trend of weakening national politics versus an omnipotent economical world, which – although I appreciate there is now a rising sense of “corporate citizenship” with several examples of good practices, as we have just seen – can be at times regardless of moral values and look at childhood either as an undemanding labour force or as an easy market to conquer at all costs. A trend which also tends sometimes to “de-regulate” (on the pretext that regulations can be impeding a hypothetical international commercial or economical development) rather than to set the needed standards or guidelines our intermingled world requires.

A gloomy, pretty hopeless picture indeed. And genuine challenges for us to take up, as a community of which we all here are relevant representatives, from the political world, the inter-governmental community, from the NGO and civil society community, from the corporate world. Each of us has his or her own responsibility, his or her own means and resources, his or her own ideas and power, to change things. We have already heard of several excellent and promising illustrations and elaborations of what is done and could be done better or further. Allow me now to focus on how ISS’s potential and activities can contribute, on a global scale, for a *World Fit for Children*.

International Social Service has undoubtedly children at the heart of its endeavours, under several different perspectives.

First, its over 80-year old involvement – may I just remind here the audience that ISS has been founded in 1924, in the wake of the 1st World War’s dismaying consequences on the social welfare of millions of people – in solving cross-border social problems that individuals, families and children encounter at the favour of international movements gives our organisation a hands-on, grass-rooted, expertise in dealing with situations where children are so often the helpless and innocent victims. Around two-thirds of our global caseload – some 40’000 cases per year – are related to children: family conflicts across borders, custody issues, right of access to parents, alimony issues, tracing, adoption, kinship care, etc. Because casework is by essence related to individual cases, our action definitely permits tailored approaches for the best interest of those concerned, and of course primarily the children. And the solutions we promote always bear at their heart a number of fundamental principles resulting of course from child-related international conventions and texts, but also from, and that’s perhaps even more important than the formal legal and conventional framework, resulting from what we all in ISS, as persons, have in our minds and hearts: a common vision, common ethics, common values about children. Principles which are: striving for the preservation of the integrity of the family cell, the best place for a child to grow in; promoting family-based solutions; maintaining the child insofar as possible in his/her own culture; protecting/advocating for the child’s rights as laid down in the 1989 UN Convention. Of course, these “tailored approaches” I was mentioning, as close as possible to the individuality of the cases we handle, entail several pre-requisites: an acute knowledge of the traditions and customs, excellent acquaintance with the local legal frameworks, an adequate integration in the local social systems and interaction with all the national authorities and institutions

concerned, and last and not least, the full understanding of languages used. ISS, which right from the onset has been built upon a federative principle, aiming at bridging across borders social interventions and facilitating international cooperation between social agencies, has a unique asset to achieve its casework mission in full fulfilment of these pre-requisites: its network (of which a significant sample is present here in this room). Intimately anchored within their home societies, ISS units do possess the required multi-disciplinary knowledge, acquaintance, recognition and understanding for favouring the best possible solutions to the problems encountered, especially those involving children.

Furthermore, beyond the casework but certainly flowing out from it, many ISS units throughout the world have developed specific projects around children. To quote just a few of them: re-insertion programmes for returning unaccompanied minors at a sub-continental level in Africa, in Albania, in Morocco; preparation to post-institutional life of institutionalized adolescents in Bulgaria; promoting access and facilitating the maintenance of family links of children in Libya with the other parent still residing in Britain; sheltering and social care for unaccompanied minors here in Hong Kong; still here in Hong Kong, a most admirable, concrete and efficient sensitization programme for the immigrating domestic female workers from the Philippines, as a preventive measure to exploitation and abuse by ruthless employers. There are many other examples of course, but it would be too lengthy to quote them all here.

Then, and in particular thanks to this specific grass-rooted practical experience, ISS has been building over the years a genuine expertise around the underlying issues to all the problems it meets in its daily casework. This forms part of that second global response of ISS to contributing in building a safer world for children. Because we have a clear insight of what the concrete problems and what the risks for children are, we are particularly well placed for participating in the definition and implementation of international frameworks meant at improving the protection of children. As an example, thanks to our thorough practical knowledge of cross-border family conflicts – to no doubts a phenomenon unfortunately on the rise, for various reasons - in which children are too often torn as objects of personal conflicting interests, we have been able to contribute effectively in the definition of some major texts regulating on an international perspective these aspects, such as The Hague conventions of 1980 (on international child abduction) and of 1996 (on parental authority). In a similar way, our knowledge of the practical issues surrounding international adoption has enabled ISS to contribute to the development of the 1993 Hague Convention on international adoption, and to set up a widely recognized and valued expertise centre (the International Reference Centre) that promotes the ratification of this convention and that helps all those concerned (be it national authorities, organisations or even resource individuals) carry out its provisions. More recently even, this conceptual expertise, let me repeat it: based on hands-on practical experience, has made us a valuable partner to UNICEF and the Committee for the Rights of the Child (CRC) in working on a most ambitious joint endeavour: drafting international guidelines for the protection and alternative care of children deprived of parental care. We are now at the cross-roads on this project: a draft has been issued, through a wide basis of NGO participation steered and facilitated by ISS, and is about to be reviewed by the CRC. We are now at the point of garnering the interest and contribution of, and endorsement by, national states (those who bear final responsibility in protecting children in need), with a view to seek their consensus and to prepare the adoption, in 2007, of these guidelines by the community of States, through the UN General Assembly. When this happens, needless to state how essential and giant the step forward will be. Several other examples of this nature have milestone, and still are, ISS's history.

A third global response, and I will finish with this, could – should shall I rather say – be advocacy. To some extent, ISS does do advocacy when breaches of children’s rights are made; however, and that is probably a consequence of what we are by nature, social workers and legal experts, we feel bound either by our utmost respect to confidentiality and privacy of the individuals we assist, either by our deep respect for legality or principled and rigorous juridical approaches. Rightly so, should I add. Notwithstanding, perhaps should we learn to be more outspoken when facing settings – although they may be based on legitimate, legally-speaking, grounds – that we feel are bearing risks of greater vulnerability or lower protection of children. As an example, we are facing nowadays, in most western countries, a growing trend of building fences and protections to “unwanted” immigration. Along with these more restrictive policies, come potential threats to children and minors: family reunion gets much more difficult, unaccompanied minors are seen as illegal aliens rather than what they are primarily: children at risk. They get treat – mistreated – as outlaws instead of being protected, children and babies get expelled in appalling conditions with their illegal parents, or are kept in custody in dreadful conditions. These restrictive immigration policies may be legal, in the technical sense of the word, as they are the result of democratic and parliamentary processes, but how acceptable are they when being looked at in the perspective of ethics and values? In such circumstances, I genuinely believe that we, as ISS, should be courageous enough to take strong stands and to participate with all our strength and knowledge to the national debates, to raising awareness and to influence the political choices that are made. And when situations occur – we had one recently in Canada, when a young adopted boy who breached the law, was denied the Canadian nationality and was at threat of being expelled, when reaching the age of eighteen, to his country of origin, a country where he hardly ever lived before, a country of which he knew nothing -, ISS should not hesitate to fight outspokenly for what it believes in with utmost commitment.

To summarize: 1) a practical competence and experience at grassroots level, 2) an evident, recognized and valued socio-juridical expertise on a more conceptual level, 3) a global network deeply anchored in the diversity of home societies, 4) a willingness to contribute more actively, through advocacy, to the advancement of child’s rights. Together, these are all forming the substratum of ISS’s global response to the global challenges that children meet in today’s world. And, key to the efficiency of our action, with all the required professionalism, dedication, commitment and ethics that each individual member of the organisation, at all levels, bears with him or her, when fulfilling his or her daily tasks.

Yes, our world still bears huge threats to children. Yes, children are still in great risks, in numerous places around the world, and not always, as one may think spontaneously, in the underdeveloped countries. What has nonetheless improved over the years – and I guess UNICEF should be given a big part of the credit, thanks to its relentless commitment to an improved protection of children worldwide – is the “*prise de conscience*”, the awareness of the human society on the unacceptability to have still today, in the 21st Century, children exploited, abused, mistreated, trafficked, unprotected, denied basic rights. What has improved is the joining-in, next to the traditional non-governmental and inter-governmental ones, of new actors in the advancement of the children’s cause, as some examples in earlier interventions have shown, such as the corporate world, and also the children themselves, giving a wider, stronger base and new resources to the construction of a *World Fit for Children*.

International Social Service has with it a tremendous potential, a global, multi-disciplinary multi-faceted potential to contribute with great influence and efficiency to this global fight. Be assured that we will unfailingly continue to contribute with all our souls, hearts and competences to address the cause of children in need or in danger. Altogether, each of us here with his/her own strengths, own capacities, own powers, I am sure that we can turn real what may appear at first sight as an utopian dream: a world safer, a world more secure, a world more protective, a world more respectful for children, well, a World Fit for Children.

Thank you for your attention.

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