



A TOGOLESE GIRL ADDRESSING THE UN SPECIAL SESSION ON CHILDREN. WILL THE WORLD BE FIT FOR AFRICA'S CHILDREN? (PHOTO : © UNITED NATIONS)

INVEST IN US, AFRICAN CHILDREN TELL WORLD LEADERS

UN AFRICA RECOVERY, NEW YORK – It is not every day that presidents and prime ministers are lectured to by children and listen respectfully. It is rarer still for the lecturers and the lectured to be Africans, given the deference to elders expected of African youth. But on 9 May a group of African youngsters met with their leaders at the UN Special Session on Children and lambasted them for failures ranging from ignoring their parliaments to not hiring enough teachers. Past promises to children have not been met, noted Gael Mbemba, a 17-year-old youth from Chad. “The result is not what you said,” he told the presidents. “Listen to the children not with you ears, but with your hearts.”

It was among the most undiplomatic exchanges at a summit meeting noted for the extensive participation of children and youth. The delegates, including some 60 heads of state and other senior government officials, renewed earlier pledges for dramatic improvements in 21 specific areas of child welfare, including reduction of mortality rates of children under five by two-thirds, an end to “the worst forms” of child labour and universal basic education for the world’s children by 2015. They promised to “create a world fit for children” and urged all people to join in a “global movement” to protect children from poverty, war, disease and sexual and economic exploitation.

Numerous speakers, including Secretary-General Kofi Annan, reminded delegates that while many of the faces in attendance were new, promises of a better world for children are not. Many of the targets set at a similar meeting, the 1990 World Summit on Children, were not met, he noted, and nowhere was progress for children slower than in Africa. “Let us not make children pay for our failures any more,” Mr. Annan told the opening session. “The children in this room are witnesses to our words. They and

their peers in every land have a right to expect us to turn our words into action – and I repeat, they expect us to turn our words into action – and to build a world fit for children.”

Africa’s principle contribution to the meeting was the African Common Position on Children, a pan-African statement affirming the responsibility of African governments for the betterment of children’s lives and for locating them at the centre of Africa’s development. “Today’s investment in children is tomorrow’s peace, security, stability, democracy and sustainable development,” the statement declares, but notes that African children have rarely been a priority for international aid and development programmes. According to the UN Children’s Fund, African children have far higher mortality rates and less access to education than children in any other region. AIDS has orphaned over 12 million African children, and over 2 million are infected by the virus that causes the disease.

The need for greater resources was raised repeatedly by African leaders. Kenyan Vice-President George Saitoti noted that “on the one hand the high incidence of poverty has greatly compromised our ability to address the pressing needs of children in such areas as primary health care, nutrition and basic education. On the other hand, poor health and malnutrition are key reasons for the persistence of poverty.” Despite the end of the Cold War, he observed, “the world continued to spend billions of dollars on the purchase of destructive weapons. These resources should be invested in improving the well being of children, especially in developing countries.”

Zambian President Levy Patrick Mwanawasa told delegates that despite the country’s best efforts, progress has been tempered by “the overburdening shackles of poverty that Zambia, like many other African countries, faces.” In a region afflicted by HIV/AIDS, conflict and refugees, he continued, Africa continues to need the support of the international community. “Africa’s children must be given a future. Stand with us.”

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni linked reform of the global trading system to the future of African children, arguing that the best way to finance basic health and education programmes for children is to open Northern markets to African exports.

Mr. Martin Ziguele, prime minister of the Central African Republic, emphasized the importance of peace and stability in the lives of African children. He noted that many of the gains made in the country’s child and maternal mortality rates during the 1990s had been reversed by civil conflict in recent years. Mozambique President Joaquim Chissano made much the same point, noting that when world leaders gathered at the 1990 children’s summit, “Mozambique was engaged in a destructive war with painful consequences for children. The best achievement Mozambique made for children was to bring about peace in 1992 and preserve it until now.”