

THE WORLD'S CHILDREN*

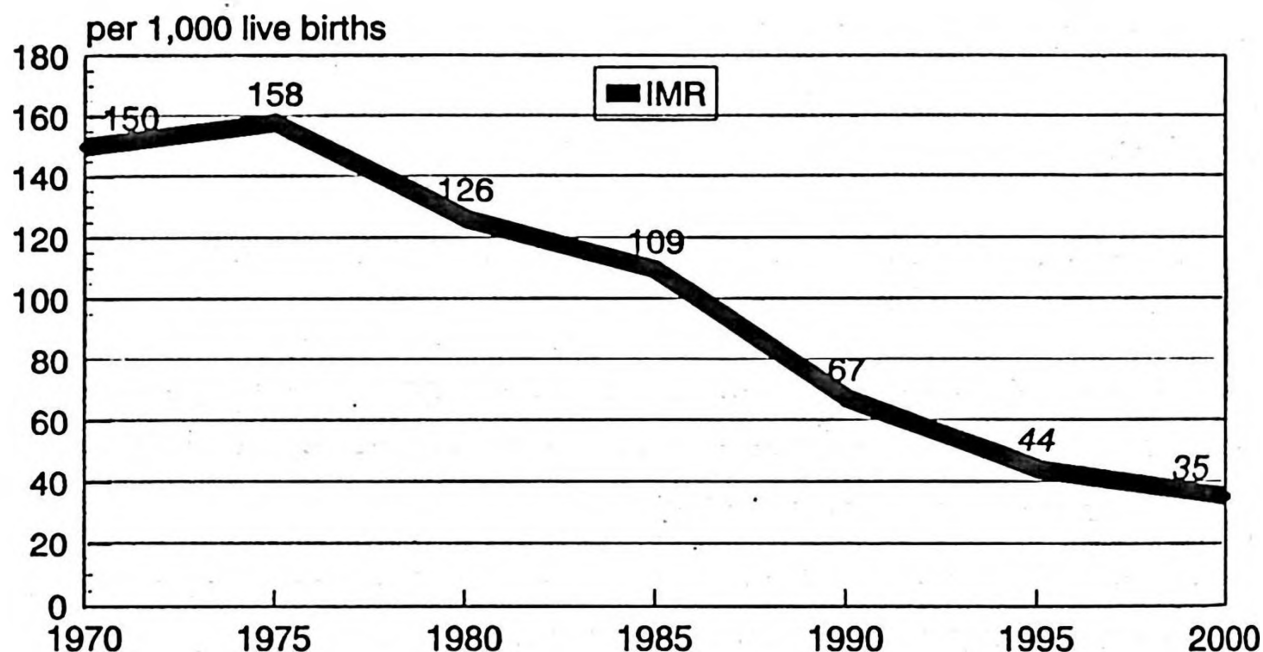
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It has been over six years since the World Summit for Children in 1990, when world leaders from 159 countries agreed to specific goals which would reduce child and maternal mortality and give every child access to basic education, clean water and proper sanitation by the year 2000. Dramatic progress has been achieved in most countries and can be considered "a victory for children and all of humanity". Over 80 percent of the world's children are now immunized against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. The lives of more than one million children are being saved each year through the increased use of oral rehydration therapy to treat diarrheal dehydration. Polio and guinea worm disease are on the verge of eradication. Since 1990, an additional 1.5 million people are using iodized salt, protecting around 12 million infants each year from iodine deficiency, the world's leading cause of preventable mental retardation. There has also been significant progress in the provision of universal access to safe drinking water.

In Turkey, the infant mortality rate used to be between 300 to 350 per thousand live births in the urban areas, where reports were available in the 1940s. Conditions in isolated villages must have been far worse at that time. Scientific developments in pediatrics, strengthening of national health services, and utilization of cost-effective methods like immunization, oral rehydration therapy, promotion of breastfeeding and growth monitoring have contributed to the dramatic decrease in Turkey's infant mortality rate now 42 per thousand live births nationwide. The first round of National Immunization Days for this year, to eradicate polio in Turkey, just ended last week, by the way. And yet, 42 children out of 1000 live births still die each year in Turkey before their first birthday (Fig. 1). The rates continue to be high in eastern and southeast Turkey. Surely, some of these deaths (and sorrow to their families) can be prevented at low cost.

* This lecture was given on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the foundation of Hacettepe University Ihsan Doğramacı Children's Hospital and the 30th anniversary of the foundation of Hacettepe University, on May 5, 1997.

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Source: SIS

**Figures for 1995 and onwards are based on estimations*

Fig. 1: Infant mortality trends in Turkey.

New Developments in Public Health

Permit me to mention a few concrete areas where we can immediately make a difference to the chance of children's survival. A new and comprehensive study on immunization -the "State of the World's Vaccines and Immunization" that was launched jointly by WHO and UNICEF in September 1996- predicts that over the next 15 years, revolutionary new vaccines could save the lives of some eight million children who die each year from infectious diseases. That is if sustained efforts are made to ensure that these vaccines are affordable in the developing world. The study also urges the international community to continue supporting scientific research and global immunization.

Recent research and discoveries in the Central Asian Republics show that anemia caused by iron deficiency among women and adolescents can be tackled in a cost-effective way. They have started to fortify their flour and to prescribe weekly iron tablets instead of daily tablets.

Beyond the creation of baby-friendly hospitals that encourage mothers to breastfeed instead of bottlefeed, we must look at existing legal codes. The International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes is a practical aid to governments in fulfilling each country's obligation to protect young infants.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

What happens to those children who have been immunized and survive childhood diseases? By ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in December 1994, the Turkish Government has pledged to protect the best interests and rights of the child until age 18. By signing the Convention, Turkey recognizes every child's right to develop physically, mentally and socially to his or her fullest potential, to express his or her opinions freely, and to participate in decisions affecting his or her future. This new ethic goes for girls as well as boys; it applies to children living in rural and hard-to-reach areas; it is as valid for children whose families and communities are poor, as for those who are better-off; and it should benefit children with disabilities and those of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities as well as those from the mainstream of society.

The cause of child rights has been gaining ground throughout the century, but recognition of the proposition that children have human rights of their own has developed with decisive force in recent years. The adoption of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN General Assembly and its subsequent near universal ratification (except for the USA, Somalia and the Cook Islands) marks a new era in the cause of children worldwide.

In its 50th year, UNICEF's new Mission Statement recognizes that the pursuit of children's rights is its fundamental purpose. UNICEF's work on behalf of children is now guided by the principles and standards established by the Convention for overall protection of childhood. We are mandated by the UN General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. We are now working to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles.

The fundamental rationale for UNICEF's work has, until now, been the existence of gross poverty in large parts of the world, and the consequent deprivation in nutrition, health, education, and other essential human needs suffered by many children in developing countries. The organization's roots were quintessentially humanitarian and its structure and the deployment of the resources available to it have primarily reflected the overall aim of combating child distress by short- and long-term means. The goals for the year 2000, agreed upon at the World Summit for Children in 1990, correspond to commitments for "human development" strategies or "meeting basic needs".

The emergence of children's rights and their elaboration in the Convention implies a shift in the rationale for our work, from meeting basic needs to fulfilling basic human rights. The idea that every human being has basic rights -which it is the duty of an earthly power, usually the state or the government, to respect and to fulfill- goes back to the French Revolution and beyond. The international

expression of these rights begins with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has been followed by the other declarations and conventions. Most of the rights covered in these instruments have been expressed as civil liberties, political freedoms and protection from various forms of abuse and exploitation; others as aspirational social and economic rights.

UNICEF believes that the time has now come to put the needs and the rights of children at the very center of every country's development strategy. This argument is based neither on institutional vested interest nor on sentimentality about the young. It is based on the fact that childhood is the period when minds and bodies, values and personalities are being formed and during which even temporary deprivation is capable of inflicting lifelong damage and distortion on human development. It follows that, whether the threat be war and violence or economic marginalization, children should, as far as humanly possible, be protected from the worst mistakes and malignancies of the adult world.

For this reason, the vital, vulnerable years of childhood should be given a first call on societies' concerns and capacities. This commitment should be maintained in good and bad times. A child has only one chance to develop, and the protection of that one chance therefore demands the kind of commitment that though there will always be something more immediate, there will never be anything more important.

Meeting children's basic needs and investing in their healthy development will help accelerate finding solutions to the main problems that vex and threaten humankind on the threshold of the 21st century: the problems of poverty, overpopulation, and environmental degradation feed off of one another in a downward spiral that brings instability and strife in its wake. CHILDREN ARE AN EXTRAORDINARY LEVER FOR PROGRESS; Let us not lose this opportunity!

In this region of the world we like to think that the situation for children is constantly improving. Yet, many families are having to cope with spiraling inflation, unemployment, and continuing deterioration in their material conditions. Poverty and social dislocation have put enormous burdens on families who often have limited capacity or experience in taking responsibility for their children's welfare-traditionally the task of state authorities. Since child monitoring and checking mechanisms, including those normally expected within school and health systems, have been eroded and are in need of reform, children are suffering.

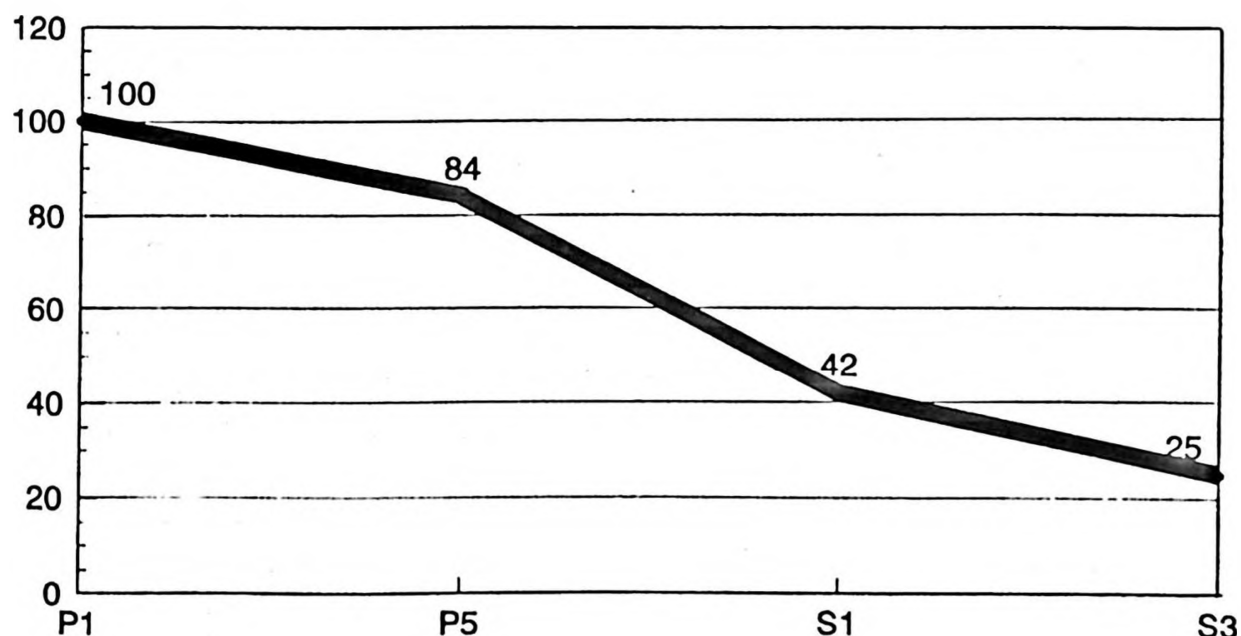
Poor nutrition, alcoholism, smoking, stress, and increasing violence are also taking their toll on families. Parents are having to take greater responsibility for the development of their children at a time when they are less able to do so, and when child health and education needs are rising. Former full enrollment in primary schools has ceased to exist, and the growing cost of schooling (even in official "free" systems) means that children from poorer households face problems

of access to education, extracurricular activities and remedial help. Deprived of social protection mechanisms, children and adolescents in particular are falling prey to drug abuse, alcohol and tobacco addiction, violence, crime, child prostitution and sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

Because Turkey is a rapidly urbanizing country, I would also like to mention the relationship between the rights of the child and risks in the urban environment. Many psycho-social problems, such as drug abuse, child abuse, delinquency, rape and assault are associated with unsatisfactory housing conditions, especially overcrowding and noise. Children living in low-income settlements or on the streets are disadvantaged in gaining access to education. And if they do, they are disadvantaged again by increased ill-health and lack of conducive environments. These negatively influence the children's future economic opportunities and their ability to contribute to the future development of society. Obviously, children are not the problem, but innocent victims. They can contribute to solutions, however.

Education and Child Development

Children's organizations are beginning to claim the right to better participation in decision-making on issues that concern their own welfare. It is their right to question the relevance of school curricula and to request a stimulating school environment. Most importantly, we must develop educational programs that first encourage all girls to stay in school, and then help ensure their academic success once there. Out of every 100 students who enroll in primary school, only 84 complete five years and 42 enroll in secondary school. By age 14-15, only 23 percent have completed their basic education in Turkey (Fig. 2). We must



Source: MICS 1995

Fig. 2: Schooling attrition rates in Turkey, 1995.

also realize the direct links between education and child labor, as well as the socio-economic dimensions of child labor. The rights of working children and disabled children must also be taken into consideration.

Child Protection and the CRC

The existence of measurable goals, deadlines and proven strategies in the areas of health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and family planning paves the way for accelerated action for children. But due to the lack of comparable goals, deadlines and strategies in the areas of CHILD PROTECTION and PARTICIPATION, we risk neglecting or marginalizing children's rights in these equally vital areas. We must not let it happen. Especially since the International Committee on the Rights of the Child has found serious and widespread problems of child abuse, exploitation and neglect in many of the countries whose reports it has already reviewed. Turkey is submitting its first report to this Committee in May of this year. Let Turkey's report not neglect to cover the implementation of all rights accorded to Turkish children through the Convention.

Many of the rights elaborated in the CRC have to do with areas of children's lives on which UNICEF has not traditionally focused its attention and resources. These include civil rights [e.g. right to a name and nationality (Article 7), right to freedom of thought (Article 14), and right not to be subject to arbitrary invasion of privacy (Article 15)] and rights to be protected from various forms of exploitation, abuse and neglect, such as protection from economic exploitation and hazardous work (Article 32), protection from sexual abuse and exploitation (Article 34) and protection from life imprisonment (Article 37).

Ladies and gentlemen, permit me to review some of the protection issues facing the world's children, including those of Turkey:

Children in armed conflict: Last year's Graça Machel Report on The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children describes the suffering of children caught up in wars around the world, and is the most comprehensive analysis of the subject ever undertaken. According to the report, two million children have died in armed conflicts in the past decade, and three times as many have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. Many more die as a result of the indirect effects of war, such as the destruction of health centers and water supplies. Countless others have been forced to witness or even take part in horrifying acts of violence. The report recommends the banning of the recruitment into the armed forces of children under the age of 18; the prosecution of rape and sexual torture as war crimes; a complete ban on the production, use, trade and stockpiling of land mines; close monitoring by the international community of the impact of sanctions on children; and a stricter implementation of existing international treaties which protect children and civilians.

Furthermore, in September 1996, UNICEF, Radda Barnen and the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association helped more than 168 unaccompanied children reunite with their families in southern Sudan in the first reunification program into areas controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Army. Many of the children, aged ten to eighteen, had not seen their parents for as many as three years. As part of the reunification program, each child received a "going home" kit, containing cooking equipment, clothing, school stationery, fishing equipment, soap, salt and mosquito nets.

Dramatic events in the Great Lakes Region in late 1996 led to the sudden return to Rwanda of more than 700,000 refugees from eastern Zaire and almost 500,000 refugees from Tanzania. The massive population movement continues even as I talk. In addition to ongoing support for rebuilding basic services in Rwanda, UNICEF provides assistance to returning refugees through water supplies, sanitation, health, nutrition, the reunification of unaccompanied children with their families, and the care and protection of vulnerable children. UNICEF also provides emergency assistance to vulnerable children and families still in eastern Zaire.

Child Labor: Another protection issue is that of exploitative child labor. The 1997 State of the World's Children Report identifies six steps to tackle the root causes of child labor and to ease the plight of an estimated 250 million working children worldwide: 1. the immediate elimination of hazardous and exploitative child labor; 2. free and compulsory education for every child; 3. stringent child labor laws and their vigorous enforcement in each country; 4. registration of all children at birth; 5. data collection and monitoring; and 6. codes of conduct and procurement policies. UNICEF's most fundamental demand is the immediate end to the most intolerable forms of child labor, such as bonded labor and prostitution, which are as grave an abuse of human rights as slavery.

Children in Turkey start working to supplement their families' income at a very young age. Among children aged six to nine, 18.5 percent are working, and among those aged ten to eleven, 31.6 percent, or nearly one in three (Fig. 3). What impact does this have on their development? We are concerned about those whose education and development is threatened by work.

The sale of children (bonded labor), child prostitution, child pornography, and child abuse are issues which were raised during the 1996 World Congress Against Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Children. This Congress has begun to have a global impact. National plans are being devised for measures including legal reforms, training of law enforcement personnel and the implementation of advocacy and rehabilitation programs. The first breakthrough is for broader public recognition that this is a problem in our own neighborhoods, and often among people we know. It is not just a phenomenon in "other" countries. We need to further strengthen the safety net for children. Eliminating the suffering of children worldwide remains an enormous task. The CRC envisages a role in

the implementation of child rights for the whole of civil society, starting with children's parents and families. By civil society, I mean the inclusion of universities such as Hacettepe, non-governmental organizations, private sector, religious institutions, labor unions, professional associations, minority groups, and the media-in effect, any organized manifestation of civil society whose activity has a bearing on the fulfillment of child rights. To paraphrase an old Chinese saying, those who have helped to save the lives of children such as yourselves now have a responsibility for their development and protection.

Hepinize başarılar diler, Teşekkür ederim.

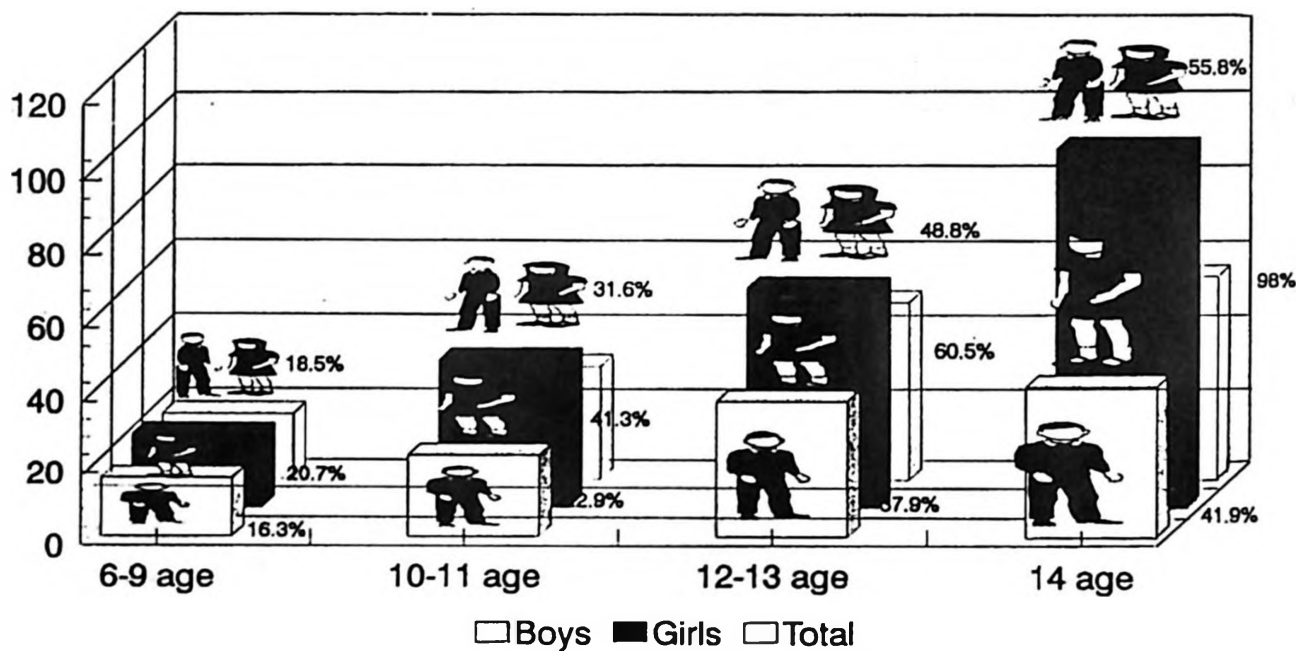


Fig. 3: Child work in Turkey, 1994 (6-14 age group).