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The world summit for social development: issues for children

From 6-12 March 1995, the World Social Development Summit--the largest gathering of heads of state in history--took place at the Bella Centre in Copenhagen. In scale and significance, the event was planned to rival the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro. Whereas the first summit focused on the need to transform development policies in order to protect the global environment, the goal of the second summit was yet one more transformation: this time to ensure that development processes protect the integrity of societies and the dignity of the poor. The Copenhagen meeting, like its Rio parallel, was intended to produce a declaration and program of action that would set development policies on a new path into the twenty-first century: a path that has been characterized as "development with a human face."

Concurrent with the official meetings of 116 heads of state, representatives of more than 2,200 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as many thousands of private citizens, attended an NGO Forum that took place a few kilometers away on the island of Holmen, Copenhagen's former naval base. It was in large part due to the persistent criticisms of some of these NGOs, to the effect that global development must take account of its human consequences, that the Summit had been planned.

In response to external pressures from NGOs and internal pressures from some of its own agencies, the United Nations convened the World Summit on Social Development as a forum to discuss three themes:

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*The enhancement of social integration (including equal opportunity for all, the empowerment of women, migrancy and refugeeism, indigenous rights, universal access to education, people's participation in government, and the protection of social diversity)

*The reduction of poverty

*The expansion of productive employment

Summit objectives in terms of these themes were to formulate recommendations for more effective action and to stimulate international awareness and cooperation.

From 4-8 March, I attended the NGO Forum as the representative of the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, making contacts with other child researchers and practitioners, and learning as much as I could about Summit issues and actions through presentations, publications, and news coverage. In this report, I will focus on the Summit's significance for children.

Children's stakes at the Summit

The Summit's relevance to children was emphasized by a Danish artist, Jens Galschiot, who made 500 faceless naked child-sized rag dolls, that he scattered like so many mangled victims, all around the Forum and Summit sites and along the streets of Copenhagen. It was his way of bringing attention to the statistic that during the week-long Summit, an estimated 210,000 children around the world died from poverty-related hunger and disease. During the ten days of the NGO Forum, a "poverty clock" ticked off the births of another estimated 676,650 newborn who entered the world in absolute poverty. These figures made it clear that, for children's sake, the Summit had to achieve more than just talk.

Given that children are so often marginalized, poor, and born into economies where they have little prospects of productive jobs, the Summit's three themes of social integration, poverty alleviation, and employment were directly relevant to children's well-being. Nevertheless, children's needs were not at the center of either Summit or Forum debates. If any one group dominated discussions, it was women. In part, this emphasis may be explained by the fact that International Women's Day fell in the middle of the week's events, on March 8, and became the occasion of day-long

celebrations and speeches. More importantly, however, the salience of women's topics was a measure of women's groups' and feminist analysts' success in reorienting international development agendas to acknowledge women's contributions and potential. Given historic tensions between child advocates and women's rights advocates, who have attempted to free women from their traditional primary identification with childbearing and child care, this foregrounding of sessions on women may help to explain the relative backgrounding of children.

Not surprisingly, the clearest and most comprehensive statement of children's stakes at the Summit was delivered by UNICEF during a day-long series of invited presentations, and in a document entitled "Priorities for children: What the World Summit for Social Development can do." This section will examine UNICEF's carefully considered agenda for Summit action as a means of insight into children's place in the Forum and Summit as a whole.

UNICEF's agenda for action is summarized in Table 1 (page X). Its list of priorities illustrates how apparently indirectly, but one could argue, nonetheless centrally, the Summit dealt with children's issues.

There are two immediately curious aspects of the agenda which require explanation. First of all, it is described as a list of proposals for action "for the world's children *and women*." Whereas UNICEF was created to be the United Nations International *Children's* Emergency Fund, it addresses women's needs as well, so that its scope of action sometimes overlaps that of the newer U.N. agency, UNIFEM, which was created to support women's projects and promote the inclusion of women in development decision-making. In fact, during a day of UNICEF-sponsored presentations at the Forum, several speakers spoke only about women's development projects, with hardly a reference to children.

Readers may ask, why this double vision? The answer is that UNICEF's definition of its mission has in some ways anticipated the logic of feminist analysts who argue--often with persuasive evidence--that raising women's status and power, from the scale of the family to the scale of national governments, is the key to bettering the conditions of whole societies, including children. Whereas development aid channeled to men tends to go into their private pockets--and sometimes from there to a Swiss bank, a bar, or prostitutes--women usually invest money on their families' basic needs. UNICEF is therefore acting

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on the premise that women's education and empowerment is the key to improving children's life conditions.

In dealing with international governments, however, UNICEF markets a focus on the "girl child," because as one UNICEF session speaker explained, to talk about women's rights terrorizes some men, who will nevertheless be responsive to appeals directed to the needs of their daughters. During the NGO Forum, however, UNICEF made no effort to conceal its current combined commitment to women as well as children. Advantages and disadvantages of this equation of women's and children's interests will be discussed later in this paper.

A second curious characteristic of the agenda is that, on the face of it, it appears to have very little to do with either women or children. Children are mentioned specifically in only one agenda action, and women not at all. Otherwise, the agenda items simply reiterate summit participants' responsibilities to deal with their mandate effectively, rather than merely rhetorically.

This apparent omission seems to reflect UNICEF's conclusion that the Summit's three themes--social integration, the reduction of poverty, and the expansion of productive employment--are keys to the improvement of children's present and future life conditions. If children's welfare is implicit in these themes, then no explicit reference to children is needed. Again, reasons to question this approach will be discussed later.

UNICEF's first action proposal calls for "a new vision for social progress and poverty eradication." In terms of "Forum-speak," this phrase indicates that UNICEF has internalized an alternative economics that is increasingly challenging the dominant economics of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the G7 (the group of seven leading industrialized nations). This alternative economics is calling for a human-centered rather than capital-centered vision of development: one that will no longer define a nation's wealth in terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), but in terms of the health and opportunities for fulfillment of all of its citizens, now and into the future.

This alternative economic vision, under the term "sustainable human development," has been effectively defined by James Gustave Speth, Administrator of the UNDP (United Nations Development Program). It is:

"development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities, and provides for their participation in decisions affecting them. It is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs, pro-democracy, pro-women and pro-children". (UNICEF 1994:18)

Clearly, if children were born into societies that were authentically guided by such a vision, the satisfaction of their needs would follow.

Whereas evidence that current development processes are not *sustainable* motivated the Earth Summit, evidence that development as usual is not *human-centered* catalyzed the Social Summit. Because conflicting visions of development, justified by conflicting economic theories, lay at the heart of Social Summit debates, it is necessary to look at the economic arguments more closely in order to understand children's place within the larger Summit context.

Children's place in Summit economics

Behind UNICEF's advocacy of sustainable human development as the means to ensure children healthy and meaningful lives, lies an implied critique of current development policies. The main thrust of NGO Forum efforts may be described as moving this critique from periphery to center in Summit discussions--with women's groups taking a lead. The major failures of the Summit in the end, as the conclusion of this paper will note, may be blamed on world leaders' resistance to this move. To understand the Summit's underlying stakes for children, it is necessary to examine the consequences of current development policies.

One of the Forum groups that formulated this critique of dominant policies most effectively was an Oslo-based alliance of Norwegian NGOs, named ForUM (the Norwegian Forum for Environment and Development). Through pre-Summit conferences, reports, and a series of workshops at Holmen, ForUM criticized World Bank and IMF-sponsored practices, advanced people-centered options, and coordinated the writing of a final Copenhagen Alternative Declaration signed by NGOs. Like the UNICEF action agenda, ForUM's analysis rarely mentions children directly, yet its conclusions can be said to have almost everything to do with the

quality of children's lives, in First, Second, and Third World countries alike. Consider the following example.

According to the development model promoted by the World Bank, IMF, G7, and final official Summit document, free trade in deregulated markets will translate into well being for all (eventually), and therefore the best long-range strategy to achieve Summit goals is to encourage the free movement of private capital. One of the Southern countries that the IMF and world business leaders have held up as a model of the success of this process is Chile; and therefore ForUM distributed an analysis of the global restructuring of capital as it has played out in Chile (Leiva in Jones 1995:9-16). By the standard of a growing GDP (gross domestic product), Chile has enjoyed a decade of improvement. The underside of this rapid capitalist growth, however, has been new forms of exploitation and oppression that reach into the everyday fabric of families' lives.

This discrepancy can be explained as an effect of global capital's search for ever more flexible forms of accumulation, in its effort to achieve ever lower "break even points" to raise industry profits. This flexibility has four dimensions. First, flexibility in labor processes through new technologies and forms of organization intensifies work itself, increasing its pace, the length of the work day, and supervisory control, and decreasing social relations among workers. Second, capital achieves flexibility in labor markets by subcontracting, part-time employment, and other means by which work can be quickly reallocated from one group of people to another. Third, flexible state policies allow capital to shed its social responsibilities to workers and to the communities in which it operates. Finally, computers and telecommunications enable flexible geographic mobility, fragmenting production and administration, and giving capital the ability to effectively "deterritorialize" itself, freeing its operations from local and national controls.

This global restructuring changes the lives of families not only in Chile, but throughout the Third, Second, and First Worlds. It results in unemployment or job insecurity, declining wages, long work days, the privatization or loss of social services, high stress, and unraveling social networks. In children's lives in particular, it translates into diminished nutrition and health care, substandard schools, or schools that become inaccessible when attendance fees are imposed, alienated and dangerous communities, street work or other child labor to supplement inadequate family incomes, and absent or psychologically distant parents.

When the IMF imposes structural adjustment programs on debtor nations in order to facilitate "the free mechanisms of the market" and debt repayment, the consequences are even more severe. During the first stage of adjustment, aptly termed shock therapy, basic social services are cut and the local currency may be devalued, raising the prices of essentials like food and medicine. During the second stage of structural reforms, state enterprises and social services are privatized, trade is liberalized, and labor legislation is rewritten to weaken the bargaining power of the labor force. During the final stage of consolidation and recuperation of investments, new capital is supposed to flow into the nation, bringing prosperity to all. In actual fact, however, this free expansion of capital has been accompanied by deepening gaps between rich and poor--again, in First as well as Second and Third World countries. And for countries that remain stranded in the first or second stages, the result is permanent shock. In Africa, for instance, the continent's annual repayment of debt interest alone, sent abroad to First World banks, exceeds total spending on health and education (UNICEF 1992:51). It also far exceeds the money received in foreign aid.

The need to review Third World indebtedness and structural adjustment programs, and to replace them with "adjustment with a human face" (Cornia, Jolly, & Stewart 1987), was perhaps the most recurrent and passionate Forum demand for Summit action. It motivated a march from the Forum site to the Bella Centre, with the crowd led by a model of a large black hearse, symbolizing all the poor who have given their lives in the name of debt repayment. As the rag dolls and poverty clock reminded participants, many of these victims have been children: those who have already paid with their lives, and those who are paying now through malnutrition, poor health, and missing educations.

The final twist to this bleak account is that most Third World debts have been incurred by development schemes designed to increase commodity exports to the First World, or the military power of dictators and elites--increasing the hardships of the poor from the outset. For example, First World governments, corporations, and investors cash in on Third World arm sales twice: through high profits on the sales, and then through interest on the loans made for the purpose of the sales. The consequences for children are made clear in the UNDP's 1994 *Human Development Report*. Developing countries annually spend 125 billion dollars on their military budgets: only 4% of which would provide universal primary education, educate women to the same level as men, and reduce adult illiteracy by half. An additional 12% of this money would provide primary health care for all (including the immunization of all children), eliminate severe malnutrition, reduce moderate

malnutrition by half, and provide safe drinking water for all. Even the creation of export markets--which on the surface may appear more benign--often deprives poor families of basic resources, including land for growing food.

Moving children from silent victims to expressive agents

While there were about 75 presentations about children and adolescents among the more-than-900 NGO sessions scheduled during the Forum (or about 12% of the total), many of the presenters cancelled--as they did in other subject areas. Apparently a number of groups were unable to find adequate funding to attend. For the most part, children's interests were assumed to be represented by larger issues like women and development, or the need to reform global economic policies. In part, this was a fair assumption. In other respects, however, this silent representation of children was highly problematic.

One reason why it was problematic may be illustrated by a series of presentations sponsored by the Danish Red Cross on the subject of children of war zones and refugees. During these presentations, two opposing conceptions of children and childhood became evident.

One conception of children and childhood was implicit, but never articulated, in several of the session presentations--just as it was implicit, but not articulated, in the Forum and Summit as a whole. According to this view, children are primarily passive victims or beneficiaries of adult actions. They are innocent, vulnerable, and dependent, and therefore societies' primary responsibility is to protect them from adult experiences, like war and work, so that they can develop in their separate spheres of school and play.

If one takes this position, then it follows that it is enough to ensure that societies will enjoy peace, full employment, and prosperity, with the understanding that parents and others in authority will then protect and provide for their children in turn. In this case, children can be assumed to be silent recipients of the consequences of adult policies, and therefore it is enough to focus on improving policies--not on children specifically. These assumptions evidently characterized children's place in the Summit scheme.

These assumptions were also evident in a number of the presentations organized by the Red Cross, an organization founded in the nineteenth century when a view of children as passive victims or beneficiaries was pronounced. These presentations emphasized children's passivity by primarily listing different forms of violence and injustice against children, and statistics regarding children's deaths, injuries, and psychological disorders.

Another conception of children and childhood emphasizes young people's potentials as agents of personal and social change. This view does not in any way deny the seriousness of children's suffering, or societies' responsibility to provide protection from violence and oppression, yet it observes that children are also often agents in their own fates, and in the fates of their families and societies.

This position was most forcefully expressed in two presentations by Sara Gibbs, a British anthropologist who has researched the readjustment of rural children in postwar Mozambique. Gibbs entered Mozambique one year after the official declaration of the end of war in 1992, and worked in a village that had been particularly affected by the war's terrorism. What she found was a village view of children as active and resilient contributors to their families and their society, and a non-Western understanding of the postwar healing process that stressed the importance of basic subsistence work by all ages, including children. Along with these alternative beliefs and practices, Gibbs found that post-traumatic stress syndromes were not a universal consequence of children's experience of the war's traumas.

The villagers expressed their belief in a parable which compared children to a banana tree. Just as a banana tree does not need shade and protection after five or six years, but begins to grow so strongly that it can even survive forest fires, putting out new shoots as soon as the fire is over, so children are strong and resilient survivors, who soon take over their own independent growth. The village community also felt that the heart, not the head, was primarily affected by the war, so that "what we need to do is to calm the heart." The most effective way to do this, they claimed, is work--the routine work of planting, harvesting, and communal feasting, such as characterized the rhythms of daily life before the war. In this work, children were highly valued contributors; and when their parents had been killed in the war, they began to assume their mother's or father's responsibilities at an early age. Rather than seeing these responsibilities as a misfortune, children accepted them as a source of self-esteem and integration into village life.

Gibbs concluded by observing that, when disasters happen, Western officials, NGOs, and humanitarians tend to react by saying, "Don't just stand there, do something." What we need to learn to say, she suggested, is, "Don't just do something; stand there first"--stand there to take time to observe and listen to children and their families, in order to understand their primary needs and strengths within the contexts of their cultures and special circumstances. Otherwise, children's highest potentials may never even be noticed.

Although Gibbs presented the importance of work, by young and old alike, as a culturally-specific means of "calming the heart," other contributors to the Red Cross presentations suggested that this stress on the importance of children's active contributions to their families' and societies' collective good may, in fact, reflect a universal wisdom. Jørgen Pauli Jensen, who had done research with adolescent boys in the Palestinian Intifada, noted that the boys were reacting against their fathers' loss of work and their own loss of future prospects. As one father put it, "You've got to have a job, or else you're nothing." Helge Kjersem, a Red Cross medical officer, noted research which showed that psychological problems multiply the longer that people stay in conditions of passivity in refugee camps. The ability to work productively, he argued, is central to everyone's ability to take control of one's life, whatever the age.

If this view of children as active agents within their societies' patterns of work and ritual were assimilated into development models, then children's needs and experiences could no longer be left to the background. It could no longer be assumed that parents--not even mothers, and certainly not distant decision-makers--always understand children's best interests. This view of children as active agents implies that they must be given opportunities to speak and act for themselves, and to form alliances with adults who will work with them, not just for them. It also implies that there may be occasions when children's interests and adult interests--even mothers' interests--may not be identical, and that differences must then be explicitly acknowledged and negotiated.

This view of children as independent contributors to social development accords with articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specify children's rights to express their opinions freely and to participate in decisions affecting their future. Considering that more than 160 nations have ratified the Convention, thereby committing themselves to implementing these articles, children's concerns and contributions deserved a much more overt place in Forum and Summit discussions than they received.

It should be noted that this conflict over the definition of childhood and appropriate courses of child development parallels the larger Summit debate over the appropriate definition of economic and social development. In each case, the underlying question is, "What does development mean, and who defines it?" In the economic sphere, the dominant assumption has been that a Northern model of neoliberal capitalism needs to be transplanted to the South, while traditional forms of food production, craftsmanship, and medicine have been discounted. In practice, however, this model has contributed to social disintegration. Similarly, "child development experts" must proceed cautiously--whether they are academics, bureaucrats, teachers, or parents--by remaining open to children's own expressions of their authentic aspirations and abilities.

Summit and Forum achievements

There was consensus among observers that the Summit's most lasting effect will be that it placed social concerns permanently on the international agenda, so that it will no longer be possible to evaluate development projects solely in terms of financial profits, without also calculating impacts on the poor. The 116 national leaders who signed the final Declaration committed themselves to "social and people-centered sustainable development"; to reducing social inequalities within and between countries; to promoting democracy and transparent and accountable governance; to upholding human rights and universal and equitable access to quality education, health, and job training; to addressing the debt problem; and to mobilizing adequate and predictable funding to achieve these goals. They also called on structural adjustment programs to promote basic social services, reduce negative social impacts, and ensure that women do not bear disproportionate burdens. Finally, they scheduled the United Nations General Assembly to convene a special session in the year 2000 to review and appraise implementation.

How well were UNICEF priorities fulfilled? The official Declaration does outline a new level of international agreement on the need for social progress and poverty eradication through the means of sustainable development, human rights, and democracy. It calls for special support for the least developed countries in Africa and elsewhere. In terms of the well-being of women and children, it pledges countries "to achieve equality and equity between women and men, and to promote leadership roles of women in all levels of society." It makes specific reference to

the need to abolish child labor; gives priority to women and girls "regarding lifelong learning, completing school, and access to education and health education"; and pledges support for programs "to protect all women and children against exploitation, trafficking, child prostitution, female genital mutilation and child marriages." It also calls for "children's access to education, adequate nutrition and health care, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child."

Where do the final Declaration and Programme of Action fail? To the general disappointment of Forum NGOs, they fail--to use the terms of UNICEF's agenda--in the areas of "clear, feasible, measurable, and time-bound targets," in "estimates of costs and sources of financing," in establishing "effective structures for monitoring the social impact of development policies," and in identifying "the role and responsibilities of the United Nations and its agencies in supporting and monitoring actions agreed on at the Summit."

In other words, world leaders only went as far as committing themselves to high-sounding generalities. They failed to make specific binding commitments regarding how nations would aid those who fall behind under the current system of market competition. They allowed each country to set its own target date to eradicate severe poverty. They left the 20/20 proposal voluntary, and made no mention of other suggestions to raise aid levels (such as the Tobin tax of 0.5% on the one trillion dollars of daily global currency transactions, most of them speculative; taxes on international airlines tickets and shipping; a demilitarization fund). Although they referred to the need to reduce nations' debt burdens, they offered no new approaches (such as the debt-for-social development swaps suggested by the UNDP). Expressing frustration over this inaction, when Gro Harlem Brundtland addressed the assembled world leaders, she rebuked them in the words of Martin Luther King that "the check has come back from the bank of justice marked 'insufficient funds.'" Broadcast on a big screen at the NGO Forum, her speech was welcomed with warm applause.

In keeping with the tone of Brundtland's speech, there were signs of an emerging Scandinavian alliance to go beyond rhetoric to effective action. This impetus was embodied in the Copenhagen Alternative Declaration: the major document to come out of the NGO Forum, endorsed by over 600 NGOs, many of them alliances, representing a total of more than 8,600 NGOs globally. In drafting and seeking endorsements for this alternative, Norway took the lead.

Building upon the principles of the Oslo Fjord Declaration, the Alternative Declaration was drafted by ForUM of Oslo, Eurostep, DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era), the Third World Network, the South Group, the Debt Coalition, and the Environmental Caucus. The Oslo Fjord Declaration, in turn, came out of the New Development Options Conference convened in Oslo in February 1995, organized by ForUM, and endorsed by the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Given this history, it was appropriate that the Alternative Declaration was first released to Forum NGOs in a public reading by Vegard Bye, Executive Director of ForUM.

This leadership reflects Scandinavia's position as an alternative social and economic system between communism on one side, and unregulated capitalism on the other. Accordingly, the Copenhagen Alternative Declaration observes that the official documents contain an inherent contradiction between their social goals and their continued reliance on neoliberal free market economics. It notes that just this over-reliance on "'open, free market forces' as a basis for organizing national and international economies aggravates, rather than alleviates, the current global social crises"; and it calls for an analysis of the structural causes of poverty, unemployment, social disintegration, and environmental degradation: an analysis that the official documents entirely omit.

A Scandinavian commitment to realize the Social Summit's goals was also evident in the fact that only Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, with the addition of the Netherlands, have achieved the United Nation's target of committing at least 0.7% of their gross national products to development assistance to developing nations. Only Denmark and Norway have exceeded the 1% mark. Norway was also credited with giving the 20/20 initiative the necessary backing to get it on the Summit negotiating table, and thus into the official Program of Action. Regarding Third World debts, Denmark set an example at the opening of the Summit week by forgiving the debts of five Central American and African countries, as well as half of the debt owed to it by Egypt.

While Scandinavian citizens may be encouraged by these efforts by their government and NGOs, it is necessary to place the Social Development Summit and Forum in the perspective that they are only part of the beginning of a process to put the most vulnerable at the center of development. Daunting work remains ahead. A *Sustainable Norway* report, for example, commissioned by ForUM and the Project for an Alternative Future (Hille 1995), estimates that Norwegians currently consume five to six times their fair share of many of the world's resources.

Therefore major shifts to different, although not necessarily less satisfying, lifestyles will be required.

To conclude with a warning of the Alternative Declaration, if people of the world do not work to close the current widening gap between an overconsuming minority and an impoverished majority, "no frontier or force can withstand the despair and resentment that a failed system is now actively generating." Therefore Norway and the rest of the world's nations need to commit themselves to the process that the Summit has initiated, not only for the sake of the children and families living in hunger and poverty now, but also for the sake of a just and stable world for all children of the world to inherit.

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Table 1

UNICEF agenda for summit action for the sake of the world's children and women¹

- *The Summit must create a new vision for social progress and poverty eradication.
- *The Declaration and Plan of Action adopted by the Summit should promote community building, solidarity, sustainable development, peace, human rights, and democracy.
- *The Summit's focus on human development must highlight the needs of children. This effort must include universal ratification and effective implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- *The Declaration and Plan of Action must enunciate clear, feasible, measurable, and time-bound targets.
- *Summit commitments must include special support for the least developed countries in Africa and elsewhere.
- *The Declaration and Plan of Action must identify key elements of national and international action needed to attain targets, including estimates of costs and sources of financing. Specifically, the Summit should endorse the 20/20 initiative, which calls on donor countries to allocate a minimum of 20 per cent of their ODA (overseas development assistance) to basic human services (such as primary health care, primary education, sanitation, safe water, nutrition, and family planning), and developing countries to earmark 20 per cent of their national budgets for the same purposes.
- *The Summit must establish effective structures for monitoring the social impact of development policies, as well as reporting on the implementation of Summit commitments. This evaluation must involve not only national governments, but mobilize all sectors of society through dialogues that include families, communities, local governments, NGOs, the media, and social, cultural, religious, and professional groups.
- *The Declaration and Plan of Action should identify the role and responsibilities of the United Nations and its agencies in supporting and monitoring actions agreed on at the Summit.

¹ Summarized from *Priorities for children: What the World Summit for Social Development can do*, UNICEF, August 1994.

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