CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
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Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director
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"The Contributions of Women, the Young and Civil Society to the Post-2015 Development Agenda"
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Thank: His Excellency Dr. Ashe for holding this debate.

My colleagues are ably addressing women and civil society, so allow me to focus my comments on children.

One of the parts of my job that I enjoy the most is hearing from children and young people. Their honesty... energy...and optimism are infectious. Look for yourself on the World We Want website, where children and youth have a platform to raise their voices...share their views...and express their hopes for the Post-2015 world.

In response to the question: What would you like to say to heads of state about youth issues? Eristjana Karçanaj said, "This world is ours, too! One day all this will be ours. But if you don't listen, learn and lead us properly, what do you expect to happen with it?"

In one sentence, Eristjana is making a central point that we ignore at our collective peril: children must be at the heart of the Post-2015 Agenda.

Why?

First, of course, because it is simply right. Right because all children have rights. Every child, in every society, has the right to a fair start in life.
But this is more than an issue of rights and of moral responsibility. It is an issue of enlightened self-interest.

How can we build for the future, if we don’t invest in the people who will decide what that future will be? Our children are tomorrow’s teachers… doctors …innovators…environmentalists and peacemakers.

That’s why when we invest in children, we must invest in their social and physical development. This is why when we invest in children we are investing in the foundation of a sustainable world.

Investment in education -- quality education for all children -- creates entrepreneurs and a skilled workforce… more consumers…more prosperous communities…and stronger, healthier and more equitable societies.

Each additional year of schooling, for example, can increase potential lifetime income as much as 10 per cent. Higher incomes mean more spending, more business and more economic growth for a society.

Investment in good health and nutrition for children pays huge dividends in later health care savings. Lives free from vaccine-preventable diseases…HIV AIDS…stunting… polio…and non-communicable diseases are lives that don’t burden future health care systems.

The World Bank estimates that improving basic nutrition can boost a poor country’s GDP by two to three per cent annually. And scaling up existing vaccines in 72 of the world’s poorest countries would not only save six million lives — it would save nations billions of dollars in treatment costs and lost productivity over the next decade.
Protection from all forms of violence will help decide what kind of people our children will become. Will they accept as ‘normal’ any violence inflicted on them and replicate the patterns in their own families or societies?

Investment in early childhood development gives all children the best possible start to life – through healthy, responsive, stimulating and safe environments – by nourishing children’s bodies and minds… … promoting the development of their brains from their earliest days… and shaping their future learning and health.

We must also invest in teaching our children civic responsibility. Not so much by lecturing them as by leading by example – as Paul Quintos does so admirably. Looking out for those in need… volunteering in communities… being good citizens.

Let me emphasize the interest we share in not only reaching children – but reaching all children, equitably.

Children of indigenous communities… or with disabilities… girls… urban poor as well as rural poor… children suffering in conflict zones.

As with investing in children, pursuing equity in our development goals and programs is both right and a matter of practical self-interest.

Too often, we look at equity and spending on the social sector as luxuries we can afford in good economic times, as a desirable dividend of economic growth. In fact, they are more than a dividend of growth – they help drive it.
Equity-focused strategies are not only good news for the most disadvantaged. They spur long-term, sustainable economic growth for countries as a whole. A 2011 IMF study found that, globally, a 10 per cent decrease in inequality increases the expected length of an economic growth period by 50 per cent.

So, back to Eristjana’s question. *What do we expect to happen to our world?*

Children are, by nature, optimists – and so should we. We must imagine a world of healthier families, stronger communities and more just, sustainable and prosperous nations if we are to build them.

And more: we must match our ambition with action.

We must be realists. And realising our vision of that better world depends on our placing children at the heart of the Post-2015 Agenda. It is not only the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do. And it is our best chance to build the kind of world that Eristjana and all children want for themselves and their friends. A world fit for children. A world fit for us all.

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