We best measure a society’s true worth — the depth of its soul and its sense of its own self-interest — by how it treats its youngest members: the girls and boys who will one day become tomorrow’s parents...citizens...and leaders. Their lives and struggles — their view of the world — their capacity to shape that world for their own children — must be of primary concern to all of us. For their future is our common future.

Today, on behalf of the Secretary General, I present four reports that remind us of our responsibility to these children. Reports on:

- the status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- collaboration within the UN system on child protection;
- the girl child; and
- the follow-up to the special session of the General Assembly on children.
The data captured in each report demonstrate how far we’ve come together since the first UN special session on children, 21 years ago — and how our collaboration is yielding results for children.

UNICEF is proud to collaborate with our sister agencies across the UN family, as well as Member States, not only in helping prepare these reports — but most importantly, as we act together to promote the rights of children...of every child...around the world.

That includes our efforts to protect them from violence, abuse and exploitation. Too often, abuse occurs in the shadows...undetected...unreported...and worse, accepted.

Together, our agencies are working with partner countries not only to shine a light on this issue — but to take action. For example, child trafficking laws were developed or passed in Belize, Bolivia, Cambodia, Maldives and Papua New Guinea, among others. Vietnam is strengthening its domestic violence and human trafficking laws. The number of countries that have prohibited corporal punishment in schools reached 117 in 2012. And 10,000 communities in 15 African countries have declared their commitment to end the outrageous practice of female genital mutilation.
Our common campaign for the universal ratification of the optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child has resulted in a total of 166 states joining the protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. And 20 more states have ratified the optional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, bringing the total to 152.

But perhaps the most rewarding measurement of our success is lives saved. As the report on the follow-up to the special session on children indicates, the annual rate of child deaths has fallen dramatically over the last two decades — from 12 million per year in 1990 to 6.9 million per year in 2011. An estimated 90 million young lives have been saved over the last two decades.

More children now survive their fifth birthdays than ever before. Because more are gaining an education...getting the nutrition they need to fuel their growth and brain development...and being saved from illness, diseases and death.

More children — but not all. The four reports also highlight the magnitude of the work still to be done...the unfinished business. Why our progress to date is not nearly enough.

We cannot be satisfied that 18,000 children still die every day, mostly from causes we can prevent.
We cannot be satisfied that 25 per cent of children under five are stunted, with three quarters of the world’s 162 million stunted children concentrated in South Asia or sub-Saharan Africa.

We cannot be satisfied that 150 million children between the ages of five and 14 are engaged in child labour.

We cannot be satisfied that the millions of children living in the midst of conflict are not only at great risk of violence…but three times as likely as other children to be out-of school…more than twice as likely to lack clean water…and face a much higher under-five mortality rate.

We cannot be satisfied that two million children in Syria have dropped out of school — and one million have become refugees — putting at risk the future of an entire generation of Syrian children.

Nor can we be satisfied that, if current trends continue, the world will not meet MDG 4 — to cut the rate of under-five mortality by two-thirds by 2015 — until 2028. Without a commitment to accelerate progress in child survival, 35 million more children will likely die between 2015 and 2028.
When the MDGs were established in 2001, the global community was content to set broad targets that focused on national averages in measuring social and economic gains. One result was insufficient national attention to the disparities within these averages — and thus, to those being left behind, including children with disabilities...those living in remote or conflict-torn communities...girls and women...indigenous people.

The success of development efforts is dependent on — and must be measured by — our ability to support progress for the marginalized...the hardest-to-reach...those girls and boys being excluded because of who they are, or where they live.

Few children are as excluded as those in “child-headed households,” the subject of the report on the girl child.

While we lack specific overall numbers, we know that the scourge of AIDS has created an estimated 17.8 million “AIDS orphans.” Poverty, conflicts and natural disasters have left many children to fend for themselves, including children whose parents are ill and require care. The burden of caring for other family members — including younger siblings — too often falls to these children who are themselves ill-prepared for the task.
They face multiple challenges, including a greater likelihood of being malnourished and of lacking education and access to information on health issues, sexually transmitted diseases and family planning.

Many are left unaware of — or unprotected by — property or inheritance rights.

I’ll never forget a boy I once met — an “AIDS orphan” in Mozambique. His parents had both died, and he was left to fend for himself and maintain his family’s farm. He would briefly attend school whenever he could…find moments to play with his friends at child-friendly spaces…and go to town to get supplies.

Briefly. Whenever he left the farm, even for a short period of time, he told me he ran. I asked him why. He told me that he didn’t hold legal title to the land or even a birth certificate. He believed that staying away too long would allow his relatives to seize it, leaving him homeless and without an income.

Girls are especially vulnerable in cases of child-headed households, and are far more likely than boys to stop attending school altogether.
Imagine the life of one of these girls. Caring for siblings, running a household, trying to earn an income, however meager — it’s easy to see how immediate needs, not to mention physical and mental exhaustion, could overcome a girl’s ability to attend school.

Some girls become mothers themselves, not only risking complications during pregnancy and childbirth — a leading cause of death for adolescent girls — but also drastically reducing their future earnings, being forced to care not only for her younger siblings, but for her own child, as well.

Even in parent-headed households, far too many girls are being denied an education. The report on the girl child indicates that over 34 million adolescent girls of lower secondary age were not in school in 2011.

Many girls are also married off — either by parents, or as a desperate personal choice. Thirty four per cent of all girls worldwide were married by the age of 18 — 11 per cent before age 15. A lack of formal birth registration compounds the problem. Only half of all children worldwide under five are registered. It’s almost impossible to prosecute cases of underage child marriage when a girl’s exact age cannot be firmly established. Birth registration — a child’s passport to health and protection — should be free and universal.
Girls shouldn’t be married. Children shouldn’t be responsible for households. Nor should they be working. They should be in school — learning...one day earning, and contributing to their families and societies.

Not simply for moral reasons — for every child has a right to live up to her full potential. But for practical reasons, too.

When we invest in a girl’s education, we do more than just give her knowledge and skills. Quality education sets in motion a path towards prosperity, empowerment and inclusion not just for the individual but also for societies and economies.

Increasing the mean years of schooling of a nation’s labour force by just one year — for girls and boys — has been shown to raise the level of output per capita by between three and six per cent. And it boosts a nation’s capacity to develop new technologies.

And when we invest in a child’s health, nutrition and survival, we do more than just save a life. As child survival improves, so of course does life expectancy. A one-year improvement in a population’s life expectancy is associated with a four per cent increase in national economic output.
Investing in every child is also the most practical path to achieving the greatest possible progress towards our development goals.

A UNICEF study — *Narrowing the Gaps* — showed that we can achieve greater results, more cost-effectively, more rapidly, when we design policies and programmes not around the easiest, but around the hardest-to-reach — the most disadvantaged and marginalized. The additional costs of reaching the hardest-to-reach are more than outweighed by the additional results.

The report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child recommends integrating equity throughout national development strategies and international development goals — prioritizing the most vulnerable, marginalized and disadvantaged — including as the post-2015 development agenda is shaped.

But success in reaching these targets — and therefore, so many children — depends on broad public and political support.

These four reports and their recommendations can help us all in our task of building this support — especially among governments — to invest in the future of every child.
As we do so, we can take inspiration from the growth of powerful global movements like Scaling-up Nutrition to help governments design and implement programmes to deliver nutrition to every child that needs it…and A Promise Renewed, dedicated to dramatically reducing child and maternal deaths. These movements are gathering impressive global support not only from governments, but from NGOs, faith-based groups, the private sector, and committed individuals.

It’s a cliché to say that “children are our future.” But it’s true. How children are treated, nurtured and educated in all countries — especially those still climbing the development ladder — will decide their nations’ futures. Because when children survive and thrive, they become engines of a society’s future — the builders and thinkers…dreamers and doers…the leaders…that every country needs as it creates new sources of opportunity and prosperity.

The four reports being presented today remind us of the work still to be done.

But they also remind us that progress is possible, if we put the needs of every child — her health, her education, her protection — where they belong: first.

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