

## **“State of the World’s Children in Need of Families”**

Thank you Gary. Good morning. It is a pleasure to celebrate Holt International’s 50 years of finding families for children.

What I am going to talk about today ultimately comes down to the need for a more coordinated response by non-profits, governments, and the global community to address the needs and rights of the world’s most vulnerable children.

Only by building the capacity of partner organizations and by working together with governments and communities can we hope to make a real impact on the lives of the millions of the world’s most vulnerable children who deserve our help.

We are all here this morning because we care about children. We care about a single child and whether or not we can do something to help a girl or a boy live, be healthy, and grow up with dignity in a family. We care that often children, or in the case of the poorest parts of our world, 143 million orphans in Africa, Asia and Latin America, are often invisible.

And all of us, in some way or other, know that we must try by working together to make a difference in not only the life of one child but in the lives of all children who are living without families, who are made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS, by war, by poverty, who die needlessly from preventable diseases, or who are trafficked simply because they are children and vulnerable.

The basic reality we must come to terms with is that only through a coordinated response can we help the world have a real impact on the lives of millions of vulnerable children.

Almost all countries on earth have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, whereby governments pledged to protect their children from abuse, exploitation, violence, neglect, homelessness, hunger, disease and death.

Childhood is a time when a child can grow and play, a time to learn and be loved, and a time when a child has the right to be a child. It should not be a time without love, without a family, without hope.

Every child has the right to grow up in a supportive and caring family environment and all the major child-welfare agencies around the world know that the biological family is the best environment to place this responsibility.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child describes the biological family as “the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well being of all its members and particularly children.”

And, yet, despite efforts made by international bodies, states and non-governmental organizations (what I’ll refer to as NGOs in my comments) an increasing number of children remain without the support of their biological families. They are vulnerable, orphaned, and need our support.

I’d like to share with you some broad observations about the lives of the world’s most vulnerable children and the overall context of children living in the developing world.

My first observation is a positive one. While there are considerable risks facing children we know how to turn those risks into real opportunities. Over the past two decades the world has seen a Child Survival revolution.

Through this global child survival revolution we know what it takes to help children survive. The mortality rate for children under 5 years is today at about a half of what it was in 1960. We know how to reduce the impact of diseases on children.

We also know how to increase the enrollment of children in school. Today overall primary school enrollment is significantly higher than a generation ago. Many countries have seen a surge in primary school attendance with the ending of school fees. Enrollment rates in low-income countries outside China and India rose from 50 percent in 1970 to 88 percent in 2000.

We know that by giving children a voice to articulate the kind of assistance they want and a chance to shape their own lives children can develop their own capacities. We know how to improve the lives of children’s health and education, how to give a child a voice, and this gives the world an unprecedented opportunity to reduce poverty.

The second observation is that these real successes in child health and basic education may be reversed if we do not act now and for each area of progress new challenges have emerged.

We have a long ways to go. Girls particularly are left behind not only in the expansion of primary education but also as part of the major drop off in enrollment in secondary school we see among the poor. The poor quality of basic education severely limits opportunities for young people.

While more children grow up healthy some 115 children out of 1,000 still die before the age of 5 years in the least developed countries and largely preventable global child deaths exceed 10.5 million each year.

And global poverty with its specter of hunger is still a reality of our times. Of the close to 540 million children in the developing world over one quarter are underweight or chronically malnourished. 5 million children still starve to death each year. This is not a reality we can or should ever accept as a status quo.

My next observation lies at the heart of this conference. We are in a global crisis that confronts the world's most vulnerable children.

It is a crisis that demands a coordinated response. The numbers of children in dire need are increasing. I mentioned earlier that there are about 143 million orphans in the poorest parts of our world and sadly over 15 million children become orphans each year.

It is a crisis where children who are orphaned must be helped and reintegrated into a vibrant society made up of families that can care for themselves;

and it is a crisis where we must all work together to provide hope.

Before I share some statistics with you let me make numbers real by focusing on one child.

About ten years ago, I was in Kenya, outside Meru, in a rural village where Plan was coordinating an HIV/AIDS prevention program. During my visit I spent time with a woman who was bedridden in a small hut, with a dirt floor. She was dying of AIDS.

As we talked she kept bringing our conversation back to the needs of her nine-year old daughter, a little child who was quietly peering at us from a hut inside the housing compound. The mother's entire energy

was solely focused on how to help her child, a child she knew would soon be left without parents.

I learned that she would go to live with an aunt and uncle. They would take care of her along with their own children. After saying goodbye, I met the child's aunt, her mother's sister, and uncle. We shook hands and exchanged greetings. These people were the next hope for this young girl.

As I left the village, the Plan doctor accompanying me asked if I noticed their lesions. That they too, were HIV-infected, that they too would soon be sick, and the process of finding caretakers for this child would begin again. It is difficult to understand the impact of the AIDS pandemic on children in Africa without understanding stories like this one. It is an experience that is multiplied by the thousands across the continent.

From this reality of one child let me share some very troubling statistics with you. Numbers from UNICEF, UNAIDS and the World Bank that reflect our global crisis for vulnerable children.

- Sadly over 15 million children become orphans each year. And their numbers are increasing. In 2003, there were 43.4 million orphans from all causes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Twice as many orphans in absolute number live in Asia, which had 87.6 million orphans due to all causes.
- More than half of all orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America are adolescents. And over 90% are over 6 years old. These older children cannot be ignored and programs must be developed to protect them and provide for their needs.
- And inevitably we come back to the specter of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. An estimated 14 million children have lost at least one parent because of AIDS. In 2003 alone, in Sub-Saharan Africa over 5 million children were orphaned.

With some 26 million people living today with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa the numbers of maternal orphans as a direct result of HIV/AIDS is expected to rise dramatically over the next decade as HIV-positive parents die.

In some countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Botswana the total orphan population is approaching, or at, 20% of all children.

But AIDS is not the only specter hanging over the world's children. Children become temporarily or permanently separated from their parents for a range of reasons.

Over the past 10 years, more than 20 million children were displaced by war or natural disasters and 1 million children have been orphaned due to conflict. Some 300,000 are thought to be 'child soldiers'.

Uncounted numbers of child laborers are living on the streets. While the rapid globalization of our world is for many increasing their prospects, socio-economic change in Asia is leading to increased numbers of street children, children who are often abandoned.

At least 1.2 million children are victims of child trafficking each year often because of false promises to them or their parents. Also, rigid population policies continue to tear at the fabric of families. This growing pool of the world's most vulnerable children, of orphans and children on the streets or trafficked in the sex trade deserves the world's full attention.

Children faced with different family realities make up this crisis. There are children without any adult care or home. While the percentage of child-headed households is very low their situation is acute.

There are children of the streets and children who have a home but who live day after day on the streets.

There are children who no longer have their biological parents but who live in local family care.

There are children cared for by grandmothers. These make up by far the largest percentage and absolute number of children affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa. Grandmothers or other relatives care for millions of children and they need our help. Not help by creating more orphanages but by strengthening local community resources, by strengthening existing expanded families.

Can we make a difference in the lives of these children? The answer is yes. But a new approach is required.

Traditional NGO approaches to deliver isolated projects just do not reach enough people and traditional prevention efforts that work solely through government infrastructures often do not reach the communities most in need.

We must try new approaches. We must work with governments, local actors, the private sector and together try to reach some degree of scale, to make some dent in these statistics.

The response to this crisis by the US international non-profit community (NGOs) has been quite extensive. One third of InterAction's members focus on child protection and sponsorship programs and many such as Holt International have specialized programs aimed at large numbers of vulnerable children.

As the largest alliance of US-based international development and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, InterAction has 165 members that operate in every developing country, working to overcome poverty and suffering by helping improve the quality of life of communities and families. Out of the experience of our members who work with children a number of best practices and concerns have emerged as we respond and partner with local institutions.

Many InterAction members have evolved from working solely to improve the life of a particular child who needs our help to also work to help a community and extended families cope with the challenges they face in caring for all their children. Given the scale of the problem, we must all consider a range of ways to reach as many children as possible and most importantly to partner with the communities and the extended families that are helping their children.

Some important conclusions can be gleaned from these organizational experiences.

One key conclusion there has to be a focus on quality standards, what we call at InterAction professional organizational standards. While meeting these standards is not a guarantee of quality programs, we do know that organizations that do not build their capacity to meet standards like those at InterAction are more likely to do harm, even when their intentions are good.

Madonna's recent adoption of a child in Malawi is an act of love but circumventing national adoption policies sets an uncomfortable

precedent, regardless of who the adoptive parent is. The questions arising from this celebrity adoption is a good indication that all agencies need to agree to meet uniform standards. Only then can we guarantee protection for orphans who are adopted.

To meet this crisis we must coordinate our efforts especially with local actors. There is no way one organization can make a difference at any scale and the HIV/AIDS pandemic's catastrophic impact on children means we must find new ways to work together.

We know this collaboration works because NGOs, religious institutions, government and the UN working together with community-based organizations do enable them to provide a future for their children despite the devastating obstacles. We know that all solutions require the participation of individuals, families, communities and those who serve them—government and aid agencies.

Working with local organizations necessarily implies building their capacity. Local partners need to be strengthened, whether by developing institutions, enhancing their ability to cope with very challenging obstacles, or by ensuring they have the basic resources necessary to respond to the crisis.

It is important that these local partnerships are based as much as possible on an equal relationship and not simply a contractual one. Successful efforts to help vulnerable children must be based upon current efforts by local communities to help them meet the challenge of facing orphaned children using their own best solutions.

The inherent rights of children is another lens that is shaping our community. The Convention of the Rights of the Child identifies a number of key rights that belong to children.

Every child has the right to grow up in a supportive and caring family environment. Children also have a right to have a voice to shape their own futures and they can be effective implementers of programs.

To meet this crisis we must advance the world's Millennium Development Goals to reduce by half extreme poverty in protecting the needs of children. Not only do we need to advance the 4<sup>th</sup> MDG to Reduce Child Mortality but all key areas of child protection, from child labor, children without parental care, violence and harassment in schools, sexual violence and exploitation, to birth registration efforts need to be part of the global agenda to reduce poverty.

We know that any effort must be based on a range of technical capacities. For example, there are well-developed child survival methodologies that we know save the lives of children. Applying these methodologies to the most vulnerable children remains a challenge. They need to be integrated into programs.

We have learned that HIV/AIDS touches every sector, every aspect of human life and has an impact on all household members, be they infected or not, child or adult. The problems impacting children affected by AIDS do not divide themselves into neat boxes and cannot be addressed by any single intervention.

We know that solutions for orphans must be holistic; they must be social and economic as much as psychosocial. And we have learned that real progress is feasible at the grass roots, personal level and solutions to impact the lives of children can be made on the ground in the developing world. Multiple, all-encompassing interventions are needed to respond to the broad range of needs among children, their families, and their communities.

A Framework for Orphans and Vulnerable Children created by the UN, UNICEF and global NGOs introduces an effective approach to make a difference in the lives of these children.

In a program called the Hope for African Children's Initiative, or HACI, I helped start six years ago with Plan, CARE, Save the Children, and Religions for Peace, and other NGOs, we call this framework the Circle of Hope.

It has five key strategies:

First, to strengthen the capacity of families to care and protect their children by prolonging their lives and providing support.

- o Sadly people do die. But there is a big difference if a parent dies when a child is 14 years old rather than when they are 8. Through prevention, treatment and palliative care, and food security we know how to extend the parent-child relationship.

Second, to mobilize and support community-based responses, in other words helping grandmothers or other new heads of households by providing immediate and long-term assistance.

- Once a child is orphaned we help ensure the child's future by providing school fees, psychosocial support, life skills and income generation programs to help a child's new family or widowed parent.

Third, to ensure access to essential services including education, health care, birth registration and others.

Fourth, to ensure that governments protect the most vulnerable children through improved policy and legislation.

And ultimately to create a supportive environment by reducing stigma.

When you mobilize the community, designate a guardian for each child, ensure the children go to school, ensure food security, and provide legal assistance to ensure property rights, prepare children for their future we begin to make a difference. We begin to provide a circle of hope for children.

Efforts across Africa help millions of children. But the reality is that we have a long, long way to go before we come close to making a real difference in the lives of the millions of orphans and other vulnerable children that need our help.

It is in the midst of these challenges that one is always struck by the power of human compassion. The ability of one neighbor, one family member to reach out to take in a child, to help repair a roof of a thatch hut that is leaking on a sick mother who is unable to rise from her bed.

How do you tell a child who has lost a father, whose mother is dying, that they have to go live with cousins near by, relatives who have also lost their parents and live under the care of an elderly grandfather?

Loss of this scale has no meaning unless it is expressed through the life of one child, one family, and a little girl in a village outside Meru, Kenya.

Yet what I always find striking in these dire circumstances is the exuberance of children, their desire to play, their will to go on, their will to have a normal life in conditions that anyone would have difficulty accepting.

Let me conclude by sharing two stories that provide I believe some lessons for us all.

One involves a young girl I met 14 years ago in a small village in southern India. I'll call her 'Nalini.' She was about 9. The other is a story about Michael a boy of 17 who was orphaned on the banks of Lake Victoria when he was 15.

Years ago I was visiting our program area with a Plan doctor and personnel from our local partner organization, Myrada. The village was tucked away behind another village, it was dry as the monsoon rains had not yet come, and little food was available.

It was a village slighted as 'untouchables.' Our partner had a child survival program in the village, ensuring pre and postnatal care, an immunization program with the government, birth spacing, ORT, and a growth monitoring effort. As I looked at the growth charts it became rapidly clear that a large percentage of the children were significantly malnourished. Some, like Nalini, were very small.

Later we walked through the village, past a water pump, with clean water, and towards a granary project. Nalini kept on following me curious about this western visitor accompanying a doctor from Nigeria. We came to a building that was storing grain, the only concrete structure in the village, when she grabbed my hand to pull me up a set of stairs.

On the roof of the granary were hundreds of peanuts drying in the sun. Nalini bent down and picked up a handful, not for her, but to give to me. It was lunchtime and this malnourished child wanted to share her food, to give me some of her peanuts.

Now years later Nalini probably has children of her own, and I wonder are we also willing to share, like she did?

Our ability to reduce poverty and suffering, as we know it today, and whether or not our generation respond to the challenge will be judged by history. The ability to care for and support orphaned children is a reality we need to grasp. What we need is the political will, a call to action, and the resources to support interventions that work.

Nalini's message through her sharing is the universal power of human compassion, to reach out and help.

Five years ago I met Michael who lives near Lake Victoria, an orphan at 15 and who by 17 had organized a group of orphaned children to provide sewing services for their village, and with the income they help feed 103 fellow orphans lunch each day, without any outside help.

Michael was asking for some assistance, he was looking for someone to meet him half way to further develop his enterprise, to help him reach more children. He does not deserve our pity. We must meet the efforts of the Michaels of this world half way. The solutions to the world's orphan and vulnerable children crisis lie in these community efforts and our ability to partner with them.

In Michael's efforts we recognize the spark of what the human spirit can do. Our challenge is to raise global awareness of the crisis facing orphaned and vulnerable children and ask people to meet the Michael's of this world half way. Only with you by working together can we make this happen.

Thank you.

Sam Worthington  
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