

Statement by H.E. Mr. Daw Penjo, Ambassador & Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations on the

Commemorative High-Level Plenary Meeting Devoted to the Follow-up to the Outcome of the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children

11th – 12th December, 2007

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to lead the Bhutanese delegation with our two youth representatives to this important meeting as we take stock of the progress that was set out by the 27th Special Session of the General Assembly. My delegation would like to thank the Secretary-General for the follow-up report to the Special Session as contained in document A/62/259. We are confident that under your able stewardship the deliberation of this High Level Plenary Meeting would be productive.

Mr. President,

It was five years ago that the General Assembly made commitments to a series of goals in improving the situation of children and young people in the document entitled “A World Fit for Children.” As highlighted in the Secretary General’s report, while there have been notable achievements since 2002, greater effort is still needed in achieving the WFFC indicators and the MDGs. This event is, therefore, an important opportunity for us all to review progress and step up efforts to achieve the goals agreed upon in 2002.

Mr. President,

The World Fit for Children identified four major goals – promoting healthy lives, providing quality education, protection against abuse, exploitation and violence, and combating HIV/AIDS. Achieving these goals for the developing countries, especially the LDCs, continues to be demanding in the face of poverty, income inequality, HIV/AIDS, climate change and humanitarian crisis across the globe. If we are to achieve these goals the international community must seek to strengthen a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to address those issues which continue to perpetuate child vulnerability.

In this context my delegation would like to draw the international community’s attention to the Secretary General’s report wherein he has emphasized the need to address the severe financing gap that exists in the achieving the MDGs. While it is essential that developing countries retain responsibility for their own development, national action without an active and supportive international system is not sufficient. There is need for balancing of the national and international systems for an effective and concerted effort towards fulfilling the rights of the children.

Mr. President,

Our leaders have reiterated time and again the future of Bhutan lies in the hands of its children. It is with this in mind that Bhutan has consistently accorded priority to investing in a better future and creating a protective environment for our children. Bhutan was among the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990 without any reservation. Bhutan has also signed the two Optional Protocols to the CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Bhutan is signatory to the SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare. It has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

While a number of legislations already exist to protect the rights of Bhutanese children, these rights have been further guaranteed under the Draft Constitution which is to be enacted in 2008. Article 7 of the draft Constitution guarantees all children their fundamental rights, and under Article 9 provides for principles of State Policy on good governance, provision of free education, quality healthcare, and protection of children against all forms of discrimination and exploitation including trafficking, prostitution, abuse, violence, degrading treatment and economic exploitation.

A National Commission for Women & Children (NCWC) was established in 2004 to coordinate and monitor activities related to women and child rights, and provide a forum for receiving and investigating reports on violation of child and women rights. The Commission is presently finalizing the National Plan of Action for Gender which will form the basis for ensuring a safer and more protective environment for women and children in the country.

Mr. President,

Since the Special Session for Children, concrete goals and targets relevant to children have been incorporated in the country's development process and five year plans. The Royal Government accords high priority to capacity building and as such health and education sectors continue to receive the highest share of national budget every year – in 2005/2006, this accounted for 30% of the total government outlay.

Although the difficult mountain terrain hinders the expansion of an effective primary health care system, well-integrated primary health care services have been established through Basic Health Units (BHU). As a result, 90% of Bhutan's population has access to basic health services. Infant mortality rates have declined substantially and Bhutan is on track in reducing the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds indicating that the MDG goal 4 of reducing child mortality rate will be attained before 2015. In 2003, an independent evaluation led by the Network for the Sustained Elimination of Iodine Deficiency declared Bhutan was the first country in the region to have eliminated iodine deficiency disorder. The Royal Government also emphasizes the importance of educating parents on health issues such as nutrition, sanitation and positive child care practices.

All Bhutanese enjoy the privileges of free basic education which is articulated as an "inalienable right" in several policy documents of the government. Furthermore education is seen as a critical means of realizing the country's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Bhutan is expected to achieve universal primary education well before 2015. The Royal Government does not perceive the goal of achieving universal primary education merely in terms of numbers but considers the quality of basic education available as an

equally important objective. The rapid expansion in education has also resulted in concerns about the quality of education. The government is addressing quality issues like the large class size, rate of repetition, and the quality of teaching.

Mr. President,

Globalisation and modernisation are bringing challenges that threaten Bhutan's traditional assets of the rich natural environment, the unique cultural heritage, and the social fabric of value systems. Though the number of detected cases of HIV remains small, given the exponential rate of increase in the number of cases identified there is cause for concern. The increasing risks of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse among youth are taken seriously and committees comprising multi-sector representatives have been formed to draw up policies on HIV/AIDS and substance abuse with particular focus on adolescents and children.

The Ministry of Education introduced the abolishment of corporal punishment in schools with a notification in 1997. Corporal punishment is diminishing quickly in schools although there are isolated cases which are dealt with very seriously. It's a matter of time before such attitudes change with increasing education and consistent advocacy to convince parents and teachers that there are better alternatives. With increasing media coverage students themselves and communities are becoming more aware of their rights.

In December 2006 the Labour & Employment Act was enacted by the National Assembly which provides for the protection of all children against the worst form of child labor. The Act does allow employment of children between the ages of 13 and 17 but not in an unhealthy environment that may expose the child to substances damaging to his or her health.

Mr. President,

Bhutan places children at the center of its development policies, and the goals, strategies, and actions of the WFFC and MDGs are encompassed within our philosophy of "**Gross National Happiness**" [GNH] in ensuring a close linkage with the principles and framework of the CRC to the longer-term MDGs and Millennium Declaration; and to the national implementation of the WFFC itself. As most of the MDGs are identical to the WFFC goals, their achievement through the country's Five Year Plans will be vital for poverty reduction and sustainable development, which in turn must start with investment in children.

Mr. President,

Considering the spiraling costs of social services arising from the country's youthful demographic profile and rising incremental costs of reaching services into the remote areas, any success of Bhutan's high priority on human development and poverty reduction will depend on sustained levels of partner support. To achieve clear and dramatic progress for the children of Bhutan, and the systematic and high quality participation of young people and children in decision-making issues affecting them towards fully attaining the WFFC, Bhutan looks forward to the continued support of from the UN system and our close development partners. The concerted effort between Bhutan and our development partners has to be further strengthened primarily in the areas of partnerships, based on shared vision and values that support Bhutan's emphasis of children in national policies.

Thank you.