

FOREWORD

Over the past ten years, great strides have been made to safeguard the health and well-being of our children. Millions of young lives have been saved as a result of increased immunization coverage and expanded basic social services, including primary health care, children's and women's nutrition programmes, and adequate water supply and sanitation. More children than ever are in school and important treaties and policies have been concluded or adopted by the international community and national governments to strengthen environmental protection measures and protect children from exploitation.

Yet for all the advances made, children everywhere continue to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation. Collapsing ecosystems leave them less able to realize their rights and sustain their basic needs: clean food, air and water. Children are often the canaries in the coal mines. Their health is a key barometer of the long-term effects of the decisions and activities of adults.

One decade ago, the precursor to this publication *Children and the Environment*, jointly published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF), warned its readers that, "environmental degradation is killing children." Today, that warning echoes even louder.

Children are exposed to a series of environmental threats to their health, physical and mental development – even their survival. Preliminary estimates suggest that up to one-third of the global burden of disease can be attributed to negative environmental indicators, such as polluted water and air. The good news is that morbidity and mortality due to unhealthy environmental conditions are largely preventable by taking decisive action and finding innovative, healthy, cost-effective and sustainable ways to develop and improve our livelihoods.

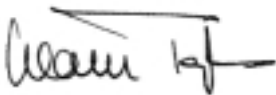
As this book outlines, prevention is the only sustainable solution: a healthy future for our children will be ensured only through safeguarding the environment. By illustrating the link between the environment and the well-being of our children, *Children in the New Millennium* intends to raise awareness and deepen our understanding of environmental health issues. Providing an informed basis for action and practical recommendations at different levels, the three United Nations agencies involved with the production of *Children in the New Millennium* hope to inspire everyone who cares about children to take decisive action that will improve both their health and that of the environment.

As this book goes to press, the international community is engaged in two related intergovernmental processes to review the progress made since the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the "Earth Summit"). The reviews will culminate at the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on Children in May 2002 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in August 2002. Taking advantage of these opportunities, this book highlights in a timely manner the mutually reinforcing goals of realising children's rights and managing environmental challenges of the 21st century.

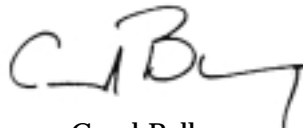
Children's environmental health issues have been recognized in many international agreements and declarations over the past decade. The challenge before us now is to translate the words of declarations into actions and emerge ten years from now having addressed the linkages between children's health and the environment in a meaningful and measurable way. In ten years the children on this planet should be healthier and happier as a result of the decisions and actions we all take today.

We are presently witnessing an unprecedented pace of development in the world alongside overwhelming social, economic and environmental transformations. In this era of rapid change, it is imperative that we rally the will and the imagination of us all to seize upon every opportunity to preserve the health of our environment and create a better future for our children.

A decade ago UNEP and UNICEF affirmed that, "we owe our children a planet fit to live on and capable of sustaining the future." We have the opportunity and the responsibility to fulfil this pledge. UNEP, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) are fully committed within their spheres, and together, to foster collaboration among UN agencies, governments and civil society to place children's environmental health interests at the forefront of our agendas.



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