



ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Permanent Mission of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations

800 2nd Ave., Ste. 400G, New York, NY 10017 • Tel: (212) 599-0950 • Fax: (212) 599-1020 • www.svg-un.org

Statement

By

H.E. Camillo M. Gonsalves

Permanent Representative of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations

Follow-up to the Outcome of the Special Session on Children

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

St. Vincent and the Grenadines aligns itself fully with the statement made by the Bahamas on behalf of CARICOM, and is honoured to make a brief contribution to this high-level follow-up to the Special Session on Children.

The Special Session on Children cannot be discussed in isolation, divorced from the other major socio-economic, developmental and security challenges confronting the United Nations. Indeed, a World Fit for Children must begin with a world fit, in all aspects, for people, progress, prosperity and peace. Today, as we focus on this our most vulnerable and most promising global demographic, we must also consider the critical interrelations between the rights of children and the myriad developmental obligations of member states.

Mr. President,

If judged by the standardized benchmarks of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other global minimum standards, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is, in many respects, increasingly becoming a nation fit for children. Infant mortality continues its downward trend, and we are on track to meet our 2015 target. The Government has instituted comprehensive programmes to combat HIV/AIDS and mother-child transmission of the disease. Literacy and primary school attendance rates are robust; and, thankfully, no wars threaten our nation or region. A comprehensive “Wellness Revolution” is underway to combat a host of preventable lifestyle diseases, and to promote children’s health and nutrition.

Since 2001, the Government has made education the central plank of its developmental programme, and has buttressed this philosophy with massive financial and legislative commitments. Last year, five new schools were built; and in the past five years, eight schools were expanded; 25 were refurbished; and six more are currently under construction. Twelve Learning Resource Centers have been built nationwide, which expand and supplement educational options for children outside the classroom. The Government heavily subsidizes textbooks and primary school meals through its Book Loan and School Feeding Programmes, and has radically expanded students’ access to tertiary scholarships, grants and student loans. Between 2001 and 2006, St. Vincent and the Grenadines went from having only 39% of children attending secondary school to achieving universal access to secondary education. Through all of this rapid expansion, we have maintained a student-teacher ratio under 20. St. Vincent and the Grenadines’ far-reaching revision of its Education Act has also spurred a transformation in the field of early childhood education, and the Government is building 10 preschools and providing specialized training to supplement private sector kindergartens.

But the seven-year-old MDGs, while undeniably important, cannot be a stagnant holy grail in a fast-changing and globalized world, nor should achievement of any or all of the targets merit self-congratulatory inertia. In today's world, for example, literacy and primary education are far less than the bare minimum required for children to succeed. We must accept the fact that a child with only basic literacy skills is a disadvantaged child in the modern global economy. Today, computer literacy is the new literacy, and an essential life skill. In that regard, the children of the developing world remain on the wrong side of a widening digital divide, which threatens to reinforce new forms of inequality and underdevelopment for future generations. Accordingly, St. Vincent and the Grenadines echoes the message delivered by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the "Connect Africa" Summit this year when he said "[n]arrowing the digital divide is part and parcel of our global efforts to achieve development for all. Information and communication technologies have much to contribute to the fight against, poverty, disease, hunger, illiteracy and environmental degradation. . . . They enable young people everywhere to more effectively act as catalysts for change – locally and globally."

It is in these areas that the issue of quality education comes to the fore. The document entitled "A World Fit for Children," which the General Assembly adopted five years ago, spoke of quality education; of harnessing rapidly evolving communication technologies; and of the promotion of cultural development. These issues go beyond the raw numbers of MDG targets. In the case of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, they mean that we must continue to expand our investment in educational infrastructure and training from a child-centered perspective, and utilize technology to help children see beyond the confining boundaries of their villages and our own tiny geographic space. Our educational system must also inculcate in children the values and norms of our Caribbean civilization, as a bulwark against homogenizing globalization and cultural hegemony.

Mr. President,

As we gather here, united by our sincere desire to deliver on the noble goals of the Special Session, we cannot forget the international blind spot that exists with respect to the children of Taiwan. There are over 4 million children in Taiwan under the age of 14, but their interests are not represented in this forum, the WHO, or any other UN body. It seems that the international community is capable of fashioning ways to recognize Taiwan's economic might, through the WTO, but unable to apply similar ingenuity or fortitude to the issue of its children. Given that our own Convention on the Rights of the Child defines "child" as "every human being below the age of eighteen years" – apparently without respect to nationality – we must urgently correct this colossal representational oversight and include Taiwan in our World Fit for Children.

Mr. President,

Before a world can be fit for children, it must first be fit. The health of our planet is today threatened by climate change and the short-sighted choices made and defended by developed countries. We recognize that climate change will have a disproportionate negative effect on the world's most vulnerable countries. In these countries, it stands to reason that children – our most vulnerable citizens – will also bear a disproportionate burden, both today and in the planet they inherit. Accordingly, we must explicitly link this session with the work being carried out simultaneously in Bali, and demand radical changes on our children's behalf. The tenth objective of the "World Fit for Children" document was to "Protect the Earth for children." We have arrived at the critical point in history where our commitment to that objective is tested.

The children of St. Vincent and the Grenadines have escaped the horrors of war in the 200-plus years since European conquest and settlement. However, the peace-loving citizens of our region are now awash in the swelling tide of illicit small arms that accompanies the narcotics trade. Our youth are increasingly on the giving and receiving ends of gun violence, and, unless we act now, our children's safety and innocence may be lost. Just as poverty is not limited to the most heavily indebted countries, the scourge of gun violence is not the exclusive province of war zones. A meaningful and effective supply-side prohibition on the traffic in small arms is critical to our children's collective future.

When the General Assembly adopted the "World Fit for Children" document in 2002, we acknowledged the gap between promised and delivered resources, and recognized the failure of developed countries to honour their pledge to utilize 0.7% of GNP for development assistance. Our recently-concluded High-Level Dialogue on Financing for Development further highlighted the continued lack of success in meeting these eminently reasonable assistance targets. The ongoing neglect of middle-income SIDS vis-à-vis debt relief, and the dearth of innovative debt swaps for projects aimed at meeting the needs of children, further belie our credibility and noble words today.

The inescapable fact is that our goals and aspirations for children are unattainable without the financial assistance of the developed world. This holiday season, the best gift that we can give to the world's children is simply to deliver on our promises. They deserve nothing less.

I thank you.