

**Inaugural Speech by UNICEF Representative a.i. Mr. J. B. Mendis for the
National Consultation – Activities addressing the rights of children
Human Rights Commission of the Maldives
6th October 2010**

Assalam Alaikum

Madam President of Human Rights Commission, Azra Ahmed, and members of the Commission, and participants, Good morning!

I am delighted and honored to have been invited to make an inaugural statement at this National Consultation on Activities Addressing the Rights of Children organized by the Human Rights Commission. As you all know UNICEF's mission is to work with all partners towards advancing the realization of all rights of all children...both girls and boys.

Maldives ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in February 1991. One entire generation has passed through childhood into adulthood since ratification. This consultation will now be focusing on how to further improve child rights for the second generation of Maldivian children under a new constitution that has an emphasis on human rights.

The government and society have begun a process of transforming itself in very fundamental ways. The reforms are generating immense challenges. They are demanding changes to old values and ways of working. Some are bound to be unsettling to many. These challenges and changes are being thrust on agencies and individuals...sometimes with little or no capacity to manage them. The Human Rights Commission is also being challenged to take stock of existing and proposed legislations, policies and activities and who is doing what in order to identify gaps and conclude on what needs to be done...perhaps done differently too...to further advance child rights for both girls and boys.

I know I am speaking to the choir here. We are all united in this endeavor to improve the quality of life of all children. We want all children, regardless of their backgrounds, girls and boys, creed or circumstance to achieve their full potential. Our task is to both enable duty bearers to deliver on their obligations and to make all rights holders aware of their rights. I believe this consultation will identify practical ways to make that a reality.

I have been in the country a relatively short time but have come to realize appreciate that much has been done already to advance the realization of child rights. Maldives is the only MDG plus country in South Asia. Five of the eight MDGs have been achieved well ahead of the 2015 target date. Now the challenge is to work towards achieving the

MDGs with equity. Who are the children and women not yet being served? Where do they live? What strategies should we should deploy to extend services to them? There are other significant problems that do not have quantified MDG targets but have been included in the Millennium Development Declaration. They include among others child protection from neglect and abuse and child welfare and juvenile justice. We need to bring to the attention of those who report on progress of MDGs to also include in their reports the progress or lack of progress made against the Millennium Development Declaration.

If I may now take this opportunity to share with you six suggestions that you may wish to take into consideration in your deliberations.

1. **Implement the concluding observations of the CRC Committee:** I did have an opportunity to review the concluding remarks made by the Geneva based CRC Committee on 4 March 2009. I understand that not all of their recommendations have been acted upon. I urge this consultation to take into consideration the recommendations of the Committee as part of your stock taking exercise.
2. **Strengthen the Human Rights Commission:** Ideally the Commission should be a fully-fledged independent body with adequate human and financial resources to fulfill its obligations. The stock taking should also look into this and identify gaps in resources and authority and what needs to be done and by whom to fill these gaps. You can count on UNICEF to advocate on your behalf.
3. **Improve coordination and collaboration:** Again although my stay here has been brief I have noticed the need for greater collaboration and coordination between ministries, even between departments within one ministry and between government and NGOs with responsibility for child rights. One such example is drug abuse among children and juvenile justice...this demands close cooperation between the police services, the juvenile justice system and social services. It is imperative to work on systems development. Very often agencies work on individual or ad- hoc activities achieving little result. International best practices and research show that working on developing a coordinated system is a more effective way to achieve success.
4. **Encourage media to play its role:** Media is an important actor for the advancement of child rights. Please do take this into account as you take stock of who is doing what. The media can and should report not only on violations of rights but also on what is been done and often under very difficult

circumstances. I understand that some progress is being made on this but more systematic efforts are needed to disseminate information on child rights.

5. **Enable and support civil society organizations:** I would be amiss if I do not make mention of the essential and critical role that is played by civil society. Civil society can play an important role in promoting and supporting the participation of children. It can also monitor and hold government and other duty bearers accountable to fulfill their respective obligations. The HRCM could play a lead role in supporting the government to establish enabling frameworks and providing support for civil society organizations (especially rights-based organizations) to play their role to the fullest extent possible to advance child rights.
6. **Further strengthen the legislative framework for child rights:** Last but not the least; is to strengthen the legislative framework to enable furthering of child rights. This is pivotal for the enhancement of justice and for the promotion of the child rights for all the vulnerable groups of children. Much still needs to be done for child victims in particular as witnesses, offenders and that there is still a lot of work required in this area.

We are hopeful that the draft bills on Child Rights and Child Care and Protection and the Juvenile Justice will be ratified before long. These legal instruments are decisive in terms of achieving greater justice and to ensure that all rights of all children are met. I trust HRCM will play a vital role in speeding up these process.

In conclusion, I wish to convey my thanks to the HRCM for this opportunity to share some ideas with you and to all of the participants my wishes for your good health and prosperity and wish this deliberation all success.

Shukriya.