

Quest for child protection

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All progressive nations have an urge to protect their children. They firmly believe that this will prove to be more than a passing illusion. In Pakistan or Mali or Sri Lanka, Bhutan or Maldives, Bangladesh or India, decision makers face enormous obstacles in focusing on their priorities when it comes to protecting the rights of children.

Examination of the balance sheet at the end of the day clearly reveals the mounting traditional and unrealistic pronouncements that are frequently made in the cause of child welfare. It hardly requires emphasising that leaders of developing nations must work for establishing institutions that protect and nurture the child. It is aptly said, "The child is the father of man." Developing economies owe a deep responsibility to strengthen people's power. When one views the grassroots leadership of these ravaged economies, one is convinced that efforts are required to provide the "technical know-how" to protect their children.

The main issue is: What happens when the political process churns out leaders who themselves need to build a stature to emerge as true spokesmen of venerable groups including children? The crying need therefore is that while the government is debating on various other issues of nationhood let it be truly remembered that time is running out for our children.

The development and well-being of children was one of the original areas of cooperation when SAARC was established in 1981. Children continued to receive priority by member states after formal launching of SAARC in 1985.

Subsequently two Ministerial Conferences were held; one in New Delhi and the second in Colombo in 1992. These deliberations revealed that economic growth by itself does not ensure child development. Perhaps the most important requirement is that these nations must take children seriously. Such an attitude will ultimately help in avoiding costly mistakes of the past. The Ministerial Conference reaffirmed the commitment of member states on matters relating to the child — the challenges, the opportunities, the strategies, and the resources for regional follow up and action.

The Second SAARC Summit in Bangalore in 1986 placed children firmly on the SAARC agenda whereby meeting their needs was recognised as the principal means of human resource development and management. This was given highest priority in national development initiatives.

In order to create greater awareness about the welfare of children, the member states observed 1990 as the "SAARC Year of the Girl Child". Subsequently 1991-2000 was declared as the "SAARC Year of Disabled Persons" and member states adopted different National and Regional Plans of Action pertaining to children. Subsequently serious efforts were made to forge ahead programmes for the girl child and the disabled persons, including disabled children.

There needs to be a strengthening of SAARC's efforts towards promoting child specific programmes. Although governments have not wisely deployed scarce resources in the past, the dream of achieving the goals for children and women with greater commitment must become a reality. To ensure that future strategies are inter-linked between government and community partnerships, all possible resources be galvanised for child welfare. Let it be remembered that the stakes are high and still mounting.

Moving towards implementation of the vision for the SAARC region beyond year 2000 the focus on "survival" goals, such as reduction of infant mortality are known to provide the plasma for strengthening family and safe motherhood initiatives.

Providing access to safe water, sanitary and hygienic environment for ensuring child and maternal health are also important factors. To ensure that the guinea worm disease does not resurface; to eradicate polio with reinforced commitment, more coordinated effort is the crying need of the hour.

Efforts should be made to cater specifically to the problems of marginalised children, including the girl child, the working children, children without shelter, children exposed to sexual exploitation and violence, disabled and displaced children and those caught up in armed conflicts. Their agonies need to be urgently addressed. The ability to make and keep promises to these children has to be taken as seriously as life itself.

To utilise the collective positions presented by member states

at various United Nations Conference such as the one on Environment and Development in 1992, the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen 1995), the Children's Summit, UN; the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995); and the 1996 Habitat-II Conference. In the transformation of attitudes and practices and to give impetus to problem solving on issues confronting children and women in the region, governments must act expeditiously. Almost all urged that implementation of recommendations once been approved and ratified is a must.

To make real progress member states urged the highest leadership in the region to work beyond ad hoc arrangements. The need to strengthen acceptable monitoring, evaluation and follow up mechanisms of child protection initiatives was urgently called for.

It was in Pakistan that SEARCH member states reaffirmed to reduce Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) to half the 1990 level or at least below 50 per 1000 live births; to reduce under-5 Child Mortality Rate (UMP) to at least below 70 per 1000 live births; to reduce the 1990 Maternal Mortality Rate (MR) at least by half; to reduce severe and moderate malnutrition among under-5 children at least by half of the 2000 level; and to achieve universal access to safe drinking water and access to sanitary excreta disposal. It was also decided to achieve the target of universal access to and completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school age children; to reduce the level of adolescent illiteracy to at least half the 1995 level with emphasis on female literacy; and to eliminate gender imbalance within a fixed time frame.

With characteristic flexibility, SAARC member states responded to concerns of population explosion. It was stated that attitude towards human reproduction must alter. The need to aggressively respond to changing requirements in the life cycle of the girl child as well as to understand the impact of a woman's reproductive rights on her child's health was imperative. A bolder, more coordinated effort to upgrade the capacity of the mother to address her own basic health issues was crucial.

If developing nations alter the feudal structure and control birth rate, there is indeed hope for SAARC states to wipe out innumerable social and human evils. We need to combat inter- and intra-country trafficking in children, and sexual exploitation to make real progress. Strengthening safe motherhood and reducing maternal mortality are critical to improve the quality of family life. Strengthening the ongoing SAARC process to assess the extent and causes of sexual exploitation and violence would indeed remove the shackles of serfdom, against children especially the girl child. In making this a reality, the consensus was to galvanise legal and other interventions to prevent such violence against the child. Furthermore, the sensitive use of media for advocacy and social mobilisation for child welfare, as well establishing inter-sectoral cooperation among governments, NGOs/CBOs should also be a priority. To protect the child and his family, the programme requires training of managers and social workers to build trust and self-esteem.

Prioritising the strategy for prevention, early detection and rehabilitation of children with disabilities, the members urged that we utilise the strengths of disabled children to produce the strategy and highlight different approaches needed to make interventions viable. Investing resources in delivery of basic services for children, consistent with community-based approaches would indeed change the outlook on disability and child responsiveness.

No battle has greater significance for child protection than the battle to end child abuse. In the context of Vision Beyond the Year 2000, the region dreams of seeing children "as the human bridge between what the community is and what it aspires to be — continuing the challenge of linking public policy, political pronouncements and community behaviour in protection of children. South Asia can have no higher collective ambition than to work for a social, physical and ethical environment that enables every child to realise his or her full creative potential for the common good."

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