

New York, New York...
Where Governments talked, young people acted
and the world saw a brighter future...



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The 8th and the 10th of May 2002. Historic dates, which, above all else that shadowed 2001 and 2002, must never be forgotten. These were the dates that the UN Special Session on children at last took place. These were the dates that Government officials walked the same corridors as the world's young people, the dates they sat in the rooms of the United Nations HQ and listened to the young people speak and the world began to envisage a brighter future for us all.

Aawww, come on I had to get the sentimental stuff in somewhere!

Well anyway we were there - the two UK youth delegates to the UN Special Session on Children - Claire Bradley and my self Ellen Raine Leaver - and what a whirlwind of a week it was. At times it felt we'd been there forever and at others there just weren't enough hours in the day.

During the Children's forum and the Special Session we were involved in different areas so that we covered as much as possible. In the Special Session we each shadowed each of the Ministers - Hilary Benn (Under-Secretary of State for International Development) and John Denham (Minister for Young People and Prisons!) - in their meetings.

The Children's Forum was three days of utter chaos prior to the Special Session. And I mean that in so many ways. The first day took place in the UN, once the opening ceremony had finished and the session became closed to non - authorised adults and media we got down to work. 300 young people split into regional groups in one room where there were fixed semi circle desks and chairs - you can imagine the scene.

We were promised that the Manhattan Centre where we would pass the next two days would have individual workshop rooms. Well at 8. 30 am the next morning (after the best pancake breakfast in New York at John's Café) we made our way down the road to the UN where buses were waiting to take the 300 young people to the Manhattan Centre across town. Where, yes you guessed it, there were no individual workshop rooms, just one ballroom with a balcony and no fresh air!

Once we had sorted out the domestic problems we got down to work. We were split into theme groups and I chose the Participation group. Despite great difficulties in terms of language within the group we got a great deal of work done, which was reported back to the committee writing the statement. I was one of the people on the Closing Ceremony Committee, which meant that a group of us had two days to create a 30 minute closing Ceremony. In the end it came together reasonably well with yours truly as one of the MCs the other two were French speaking and Spanish speaking so as to have a balance of languages.

The really great, and terrifying, thing was being on stage as an MC with Nelson Mandela, Graca Micheal, Carol Bellamy and Mrs Anan (Kofi Anan's wife) sitting in the front row. The Children's Forum although chaotic can be judged a tremendous success by the measure of the Statement that was compiled and presented the GA at its opening Ceremony. I have included a copy of the statement at the end of this report.

This brings us on to the Session itself. On the first day I was scheduled to shadow Hilary Benn on several of his meetings. These included meeting with the head of Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr Kenzo Oshima. Meeting with Olara Otunnu Special representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict and meeting with several people in the UN Development Programme. These meetings were all very interesting to listen to but I did feel like I wished I had known that these would possibly take place so that I could have done more research on these areas and the work of these departments - not to mention learned the jargon!

As well as meetings like these we also attended things like a dinner hosted by Stuart Eldon the Deputy Representative to the UN to welcome Mr Benn and bring him up to date on the work on the outcome document that obviously had to take place in a very posh French Restaurant. We also attended a lunch hosted by the Permanent Representative Sir Jeremy Greenstock to welcome Mr Denham his took place in his residence and let's just say no expense was spared.

Both of these gave us the opportunity to learn a lot about the general approach the UK government is taking to the Special Session and I was pleased to see that they battled strongly for child's rights references and worthwhile language in terms of Sexual and Reproductive Health where the USA wanted the language to be weaker.

I feel that I have managed to learn a lot from the time I spent on this however, although I feel I achieved something, I think given the chance to do this again we would need to change our research slightly in that we needed to focus more on what the UN and it's various departments do and how the UK is involved.

On our last day we attended a breakfast where Gordon Brown - who had flown in the night before - was to make a speech on Financing A World Fit For Children. We got a chance to meet him and he seemed interested in what we were doing and easy to talk to.

Carol Bellamy the head of UNICEF attended to introduce the Chancellor, this was the third time we had heard her speak during the week, she is a great public speaker and champion of children's rights. We had seen Kofi Anan speak at the opening of the Children's Forum and the General Assembly and the poor man always looked exhausted. Another famous face we saw make a speech was Robert Mugabe!

In conclusion I would finish by quoting some of Mr Gordon Brown's reasons we were there;

" our shared belief: that just as each and every child has a right to realise their potential we have a duty to help make it happen; and most of all, we are here because of our shared conviction that what can be achieved together by unity of purpose is far greater than what we can ever achieve acting on our own"

Amen to that!

Children's Forum Message: A World Fit For Us.

This statement was created from the input of the thematic working groups and compiled by a committee of young delegates. Two of the young delegates on the committee presented this message at the opening of the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children on the 8th of May 2002.

- We are the world's children.
- We are the victims of exploitation and abuse.
- We are street children.
- We are the victims and orphans of HIV/AIDS.
- We are denied good quality education and health care.
- We are victims of political, economic, cultural, religious and environmental discrimination.
- We are children whose voices are not being heard: it is time we are taken into account.
- We want a world that is fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone.

"In this world,

We see respect for the rights of the child by:

- Governments and adults having a real and effective commitment to the principle of children's rights and applying the convention on the Rights of the Child to all children.
- Safe, secure and healthy environments for children in families, communities. And nations.

We see an end to exploitation, abuse and violence by:

- Laws that protect children from exploitation and abuse being implemented and respected by all,
- Centres and programmes that help to rebuild the lives of victimised children.

We see an end to war by:

- World leaders resolving conflict through peaceful dialogue instead of by using force,
- Child refugees and child victims of war protected in every way and having the same opportunities as all other children,
- Disarmament, elimination of the arms trade and an end to the use of child soldiers.

We see the provision of health care by:

- Affordable and accessible life-saving drugs and treatment for all children.
- Strong and accountable partnerships established among all to promote better health for children.

We see the eradication of HIV/AIDS by:

- Educational systems that include HIV prevention programmes,
- Free testing and counselling centres,
- Information about HIV/AIDS freely available to the public,
- Orphans of AIDS and children living with HIV/AIDS cared for and enjoying the same opportunities as all other children.

We see the protection of the environment by:

- Conservation and rescue of natural resources,
- Awareness of the need to live in environments that are healthy and favourable to our development,
- Accessible surroundings for children with special needs.

We see an end to the vicious cycle of poverty by:

- Anti-poverty committees that bring about transparency in expenditure and give attention to the needs of all children,
- Cancellation of the debt that impedes progress for all children.

We see the provision of education by:

- Equal opportunities and access to quality education that is free and compulsory,
- School environments in which children feel happy about learning,
- Education for life that goes beyond the academic and includes lessons in understanding, human rights, peace, acceptance and active citizenship.

We see the active participation of children by:

- Raised awareness and respect among people of all ages about every child's right to full and meaningful participation in the spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,
- Children actively involved in decision-making at all levels and in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all matters affecting the rights of the child.

We pledge an equal partnership in this fight for children's rights. And while we promise to support the actions you take on behalf of children, we also ask for your commitment and support in the actions we are taking - because the children of the world are misunderstood.

We are not the sources of problems; we are the resources that are needed to solve them.

We are not expenses; we are investments.

We are not just young people; we are people and citizens of this world.

Until others accept their responsibility to us, we will fight for our rights.

We have the will, the knowledge, the sensitivity and the dedication.

We promise that as adults we will defend children's rights with the same passion that we have now as children.

We promise to treat each other with dignity and respect. We promise to be open and sensitive to our differences.

We are the children of the world, and despite our different backgrounds we share a common reality.

We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place for all.

You call us the future, but we are also the present".

The Committee of Young Delegates