

*Speech by Mr. Venkat Reddy (MV Foundation, Andhra Pradesh, India) at the commemorative high-level plenary meeting to evaluate progress made in the implementation of the World Fit for Children (WFFC) Declaration and the Plan of Action.  
The meeting took on 11 and 12 December 2007 in New York.*

### **Abolishing Child Labour and Protecting the Right to Education: A Rights Based Perspective**

In addressing this Commemorative Plenary today, I draw strength from the volunteers and activists on the ground in Asia, Africa and Central America and global movements such as the 'Stop Child Labour Campaign' in Europe who are working relentlessly towards abolishing all forms of child labour with a firm conviction that children's right to education through full time formal schools must be attained.

I am proud to participate in this Roundtable and I find it encouraging to see the important link made between providing education and the protection of children. This Roundtable provides an opportunity to advocate for a bridging of the gap between policies that promote education and those that protect children. It is imperative that Member States consider this intersection as there is potential for significant progress. Specifically, Member States must consider the fundamental link between the objectives of eliminating child labour and the universalisation of education.

We are witness to a persistent trend of child labour with an increased work force in the informal sector. As per UNICEF's 2007 report *Progress for Children* millions of children all over the world are engaged in the labour force today. They work in various occupations, visible and invisible. Because of the limited definitions of child labour many forms of child labour remain in the shadows. This includes children who work on the family farm or in tending to livestock and girls who work as mothers-and-wives-in-training in their own homes. We cannot realise the goal of eliminating child labour until all forms of child labour are made illegal. Nor can we allow child labour to persist by tolerating it through employing the logic of cultural relativism or arguments pertaining to the economy of poverty.

Simultaneously, we are witness to an explosive demand for education in the world today. Poor parents see education as the only redemption from poverty and exclusion. These parents are making enormous sacrifices to send their children to schools. We must take sides now and pledge to stand by the poor in their struggle for schools and education for their children as against the market and its demand for child labour.

Getting children to school is not easy. Each politico-administrative unit from local, to national, to global has a role to play in approaching these challenges. Policy makers at a national and global level have a critical role in setting the terms of debate and discourse. There must be zero tolerance of child labour and children being out of school and an insistence that all children must attend schools until they graduate. Indeed setting the normative framework is a deeply contested area and Member States must exhibit courage and conviction in pressing for uncompromising positions on children's right to education. There is thus a need to support a process of social mobilization, in creating a social norm that children must not work and that they must attend schools. Member States must work to improve the capacity of communities to support child rights by engaging them in active involvement.

The problems of gender parity in education are linked to the prevalence child labour. Vast numbers of girls, particularly in South Asia, are engaged in domestic work. Early marriage also plays a strong role in the preventing girls from entering and staying in school. Member States

must make all efforts to increase enforcement of minimum age requirements for marriage. Every arrangement has to be made to integrate all children who have been left out of or taken out of the school system to join schools and enter into an age appropriate class. A message must be sent that no child is so old that he/she cannot get back to school. Arrangements for residential bridge course camps, motivation centres and any other local initiative that emerges in the process of campaign and mobilization needs to be taken up. Efforts must be made to ensure that school policy shows respect to the first generation learner with an abundance of flexibility and the removal of all barriers that come in the way of their continuation in school.

School policies must be child-friendly to ensure that all the barriers that come in the way of child's continuation in schools are removed. This includes banning corporal punishment, putting an end to the penalisation of children for not having birth certificates, school uniforms, non-payment of school fees and other school related charges and so on. With hundreds of thousands of children dropping out of the schools, it seems schools become institutions for making child labour. Instead schools must churn out students who enjoy freedom and dignity. Special efforts such as providing residential facilities must be made for children of migrant labour, children belonging to disadvantaged groups, children who live in scattered habitations, street children, orphans, child labourers and adolescent girls and those without family support and atmosphere to study. Special attention must also be paid for inclusive education for children with disabilities while planning for mainstreaming children.

Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem at hand, many a time there is a search for practical, tangible and quick fix solutions by policy makers. These solutions are in the nature of ad hoc provisioning such as para-teachers, alternate makeshift schools, non-formal education centres and so on. Existing institutions and processes within the State are systematically bypassed which weakens the capacity of the State. Care must be taken to ensure that all interventions are made to enhance the State's capacities and not to weaken it.

Multi-lateral agencies also have an important role to play. They should ensure that each of their policy interventions with respect to education and child labour results in enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of the State. Entertaining a discourse that de-legitimizes the State would only enable a move towards abdication of State's responsibilities. In the same light there must be strengthened involvement of civil society in the process of monitoring child-related goals. In order to achieve this goal Member States must involve civil society in the formation, implementation and monitoring of their programs. Civil Society-State partnerships are vital to achieving greater progress on all of the major areas of *A World Fit for Children*.

It must be recognised that a compromising position only comforts those structures and processes that reproduce child labour and the large mass of illiterate children. If it is understood that children's rights have to be protected no matter what then all parties are indeed part of the movement for attainment of children's right to education and consequently for social transformation and deepening of democracy. In fact the battle is in arriving at this agreement and commitment for children. I urge Member States to make all forms of child labour illegal as no form of child labour is justifiable and all forms are preventable. I do hope that in this forum a categorical stand on total abolition of child labour and ensuring children's right to education in full time formal schools as a non-negotiable principle is adhered to whole heartedly. I strongly feel that if we pledge our resources charged with this imagination and the moral force to stand by children, child labour would be consigned to history. Children would begin to enjoy freedom and in doing so all of us too would get liberated.