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Page 56
Date 2003-Oct-31
Time 2:50:24 PM
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CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2003-01540

Document Register Number [auto] **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2003-01540**

ExRef: Document Series / Year / Number **E/ICEF/1975/L.1331 (PDF-Eng)**

Doc Item Record Title

Proposal for an International Year of the Child - Note by the International Catholic Child Bureau and the International Union for Child Welfare. 11 pp

Date Created / On Doc
1975-Jun-24

Date Registered
2003-Oct-30

Date Closed / Superseeded

Primary Contact
Owner Location **Office of the Secretary, Executive Bo = 3024**
Home Location **Office of the Secretary, Executive Bo = 3024**
Current Location **Office of the Secretary, Executive Bo = 3024**

1: In Out Internal, Rec or Conv Copy?

Fd2: Language, Orig Pub Dist **English , L.Avail: E,F,S,R. ; L.Orig: E-?**
Fd3: Doc Type or Format **pp = 11 p + ? b**

Container File Folder Record
Container Record (Title)

Nu1: Number of pages
11

Nu2: Doc Year
1975

Nu3: Doc Number
1331

Full GCG File Plan Code

Da1: Date Published

Da2: Date Received

Da3: Date Distributed

Priority

If Doc Series?: **CF/RA/DS/USAA/DB01/2001-0008**

Record Type **A04 Doc Item: E/ICEF 1946 to 1997 Ex Bd**

Electronic Details

No Document

DOS File Name

Alt Bar code = RAMP-TRIM Record Numb : **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2003-01540**

Notes

CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1997-01219
= related original Doc RAMP-TRIM ref #

251001

Print Name of Person Submit Images

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Number of images
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**UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC
AND
SOCIAL COUNCIL**



Distr.
LIMITED

E/ICEF/L. 1331
24 January 1975

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
1975 session

PROPOSAL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE CHILD

Note by
The International Catholic Child Bureau
and
The International Union of Child Welfare

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Introduction: Why an International Year of the Child?

1. There is no need to dramatize, for this audience, the stark reality facing millions of children throughout the world. No one has done more than UNICEF to draw attention to the real extent of children's needs and to point out their special vulnerability. The question we want to consider is rather this: "Is an International Year of the Child (IYC) a practical and effective way of meeting those needs"?

2. Let us first face squarely the widespread skepticism about 'International Years' in general. We have lived through a succession of them and have at least one more to go. Defenders of these 'Years' point to real achievements that would not otherwise have come about, achievements which range from the launching of specific programmes and projects to a general airing of neglected issues. Others argue that the results of international years have not been significant or enduring enough in relation to the amount of time, money and energy poured into them. "All talk and no action" is the charge often leveled, and if true, it is a damning indictment. But it is impossible to settle this question or to evaluate the potential of IYC by talking about international years in general. One must consider, specifically, an International Year of the Child. How would it be similar to other years? How would it differ? What could we learn from the experience of other years?

3. The answers to some of these questions will be clearer as we take up other considerations below. It might be worth noting here, however, that if the world is now satiated with international years, there would, in any case, be a short respite before the IYC. The year 1975 is International Women's Year, but after that, as far as we know, there are no other years likely to be proclaimed before the IYC, which would not take place until 1978.

4. We might also note here that "International Year fatigue" is a reaction felt much more acutely by international civil servants and by governmental and NGO functionaries than by ordinary citizens. A very informal sampling of opinion among the latter suggests that they have been much less touched by all the recent "years" than we would perhaps like to admit. An international year focused on the child seems to be a fresh idea for the man in the street and meets with a positive response. He can see in it an opportunity for personal involvement that was not always apparent in other international years.

I. Objectives of the year

5. There can be only one criterion for measuring the success of an International Year of the Child: are the children of the world better off than they were before? Any other objectives that might be set - funds raised, programmes launched, policies developed - all are intermediate objectives and are valid only to the extent that they result in a substantial and lasting improvement in the well-being of all the world's children.

6. What are some of the intermediate objectives that one would hope to achieve through an IYC? This question would have to occupy a good deal of time and attention during the pre-planning stage, as the pinpointing of valid and realizable objectives would be the first requirement for a successful Year. Theoretically the objectives of the Year would fall into two general categories: (1) those directed toward awareness, i.e., 'conscientization' of the general public and certain special groups as to children's needs and the means for meeting them; and (2) those directed toward specific programmes of action to improve the conditions in which children live. In reality, of course, there is only a thin line between the two types of objectives, for 'awareness' per se is useless unless it leads to action for change; and there are few action programmes that do not have to include some educational components. Still, there would be a distinct difference between an IYC and previous international years in that the IYC would put a much heavier emphasis on concrete programmes of action.

7. We should recognize that the awareness effort of an IYC would differ from the earlier awareness campaigns dealing with questions of environment, population, and women. There, much effort had to be devoted to defining the problem or even to debating whether or not there was a problem. For an IYC, on the other hand, there is already a widespread awareness that there are children in need. Few people throughout the world are insensitive to the suffering of children or unwilling to help when presented with an effective channel for action. The challenge is to get them to see children's problems in a broader perspective, to see how they are linked to economic crises, food policies, eating habits, development planning, modernization, etc., and then to show each individual what he personally can do about it. Every human being who became aware of the problem in this sense could contribute something to the solution, according to his situation and capacity. He might give better care to his own children; he might contribute funds; he might work through non-governmental organizations (NGOs); he might influence his Government to develop a more effective child policy at home or to co-operate more fully in global programmes on behalf of children.

8. The following have been suggested as some of the objectives an IYC should aim to achieve. The list is far from being exhausted but it does include some of the objectives we feel should receive highest priority:

-To foster awareness of the special needs and vulnerability of children, especially young children, with regard to nutrition, hygiene, psychological development, etc.

This awareness must obviously be accompanied by intensive efforts to meet these needs. A realistic approach to such problems generally involves action on several fronts. Developing a long-range response to the nutritional needs of the world's children, for example, would involve much more than massive shipments of food supplies (although that will be a critical part of the effort for some time to come). It would require co-ordination with programmes of maternal and child health. It would require widespread nutrition education for parents, with perhaps some simple instruction in better techniques for growing and storing good food. It would require some emphasis on nutrition in schools and the help of teachers trained to

spread nutritional 'awareness' in the classroom and in the community. It would require discussions with Governments to encourage a reappraisal of the priority given to children's nutritional needs in national development plans. It probably could not be accomplished without some change in global economic practices. None of this is new. But an IYC would concentrate these efforts in order to produce a greater impact than has been possible heretofore.

- To bring to the attention of the world some of the "quiet emergencies" affecting children and generate an adequate response to these unpublicized, continuous emergencies.
- To urge the development of a Young Child Policy in each nation.
- To encourage greater respect for each child as a unique person and guarantee his rights as a human being. Implementation of this objective might include a world-wide survey to see where and in what ways children's human rights, as set forth in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, are not yet guaranteed, followed by intensified efforts to secure de jure and de facto adherence to the Declaration. It has been suggested that there should be set up in each nation an official body which would have the power to take legal action on behalf of a child whose rights are being violated. It would function as a sort of "ombudsman" for the child.
- To provide more adequate services for handicapped children.
- To focus attention on, and seek remedies for, the plight of children caught in special circumstances which threaten their well-being, e.g., children of prisoners, children of migrant workers, children born out of wedlock, children brought before courts of law, children in war-torn areas, children exploited for labour. Action programmes would be aimed at providing relief and assistance for children already in need, and obtaining the necessary legislation or intergovernmental conventions to protect the interests of such children in the future.

9. Underlying all the other objectives of an IYC would be that of obtaining a substantial increase in the amount of money and other resources available for programmes benefitting children. While many things can be done to improve the situation of the child without large expenditures of money, still the need for material assistance is so great that one could scarcely justify an IYC unless it promised to have important results in that regard. We do not minimize the difficulty of raising funds for anything these days, but it seems to us that an IYC could, with well-conceived and executed programmes, succeed on two fronts:

(1) To raise funds from the general public and from special groups in support of children's programmes - and here the pooling of effort by NGOs could make a critical difference; and (2) To make key planners and decision-makers more conscious of the effects on the child of decisions taken in the social, economic and environmental spheres, and to persuade them to allocate a greater share of total resources to children's needs. Investment in the child, which contributes to the sound social structure of a country, should be given at least as much priority as investment in economic and industrial infrastructure - this is the

opinion of many professionals who work with children, especially in the Third World, and who feel that children's needs are not sufficiently taken into consideration.

10. In the preliminary discussion of objectives for an IYC, it would surely be pointed out that implementation of any of these objectives must take into account national, regional, and cultural differences of many kinds. The objectives would differ in developed and developing countries, at least in the priorities assigned to them. But it is clear that there are children with unmet needs in all parts of the world. The UNICEF declaration of a World Child Emergency has rightly called attention to the plight of millions of children whose very survival is threatened by malnutrition and disease. Absolute priority must be given to bringing them the assistance they need.

11. In addition we recognize that we have only begun to assess the effects on children of living in highly industrialized, "technological" societies. There may be consequences for the child which, though less readily apparent than the ravages of malnutrition and disease, will in the long run pose equally serious threats to the individual, his society and all mankind. Therefore an IYC would by no means be limited to children in developing countries. Some disquieting problems are apparent among children in the developed world and may be aggravated in the period of economic and social uncertainty which seems to lie ahead. In our opinion an IYC would be inadequate if it did not adopt a future-oriented approach to the well-being of all the world's children.

12. An IYC would be a time for serious analysis of all that affects the child, and a time for sharing of expertise and knowledge. Approaches to child study and child care are manifestly different, for example, in socialist and non-socialist countries, in developed and developing countries, and in various geographical regions. These different experiences are not well enough known outside the countries where they took place. This was clearly shown at a recent UNESCO meeting on "the psychological development of the child and its implications for the educational process" (ED-74/CONF. 623/8). If we must not ignore any of the problems associated with children around the world, likewise we must not overlook the many positive achievements in dealing with these problems. Nor should the adults in charge of the Year forget that the greatest single resource for a better future for each child lies in the positive forces within the child himself.

II. Requirements for a successful year

Participation

13. If one were to undertake an IYC, what elements would be necessary for its success? First, it is clear that an IYC would raise issues that go far beyond the concerns of UNICEF or of any single organization devoted to the well-being of children. To be successful, an IYC would have to be based on a unified approach involving many different agencies. It would require the integration at all levels of the efforts of Governments, intergovernmental bodies, non-governmental organizations and private groups. What does this imply?

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Participation of Governments

14. One of the pre-requisites for a successful IYC would be the assurance of effective governmental participation. Many Governments already have a bureau or an office concerned with the welfare of the child. Unlike international moves dealing with the environment, population, or women's rights, it would not be necessary to set up new administrative structures or commissions. Responsibility for IYC participation could be delegated to existing departments familiar with the field.

15. That would be a start, but only a start. Effective governmental involvement would have to go beyond the children's bureau and involve all the departments of government whose policies have a bearing on the well-being of the child. If one of the premises of an IYC would be to deal with the total environment affecting the child, then an IYC would have to involve national development and planning offices, women's bureaus, ministries of health, education, agriculture, labour, trade, etc. A successful IYC would mean that in each of these agencies there would be, before the Year was over, one or more "advocates" for the child. (This does not necessarily imply the addition of new people, of course, but officials who would have become 'sensitized' to the needs of the child through participation in IYC activities.)

16. The well-being of future citizens is a paramount concern in any state, and it is hard to imagine that many Governments would disagree with the over-all objective of an IYC or decline to participate. Yet we know that tremendous demands are being put on government resources from all sides. The organizers of an IYC might therefore have to be on guard against a sort of 'token' participation that could occur: because it is so hard to say 'no' to the idea of doing something for children, there might be a temptation to say 'yes' to the idea of an IYC but not follow through with an adequate commitment of governmental resources, energy and 'will'. This would be most regrettable. NGOs could be of assistance here by helping to mobilize public opinion in support of an IYC and in support of an adequate governmental commitment to its objectives.

Participation of intergovernmental bodies

17. On the intergovernmental level, there are many United Nations bodies whose programmes, or parts of them, directly affect the child. Their participation would be essential if the IYC is to develop a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of the whole child. The critical element would be co-ordination and concentration of effort. Mechanisms for co-ordination exist already between some agencies, and there are instances of interagency co-ordination working quite well in certain field operations involving aid to children. This would have to be sharpened and extended to much larger scale operations. One ought not to think this would be easy, but the chances of effective interagency co-ordination seem better in response to the concrete challenges of an IYC than in the more nebulous, perhaps more controversial, undertakings of other international years.

Participation of NGOs*

18. The participation of a third group, the NGOs, would be important for several reasons: First, they can greatly supplement and extend official efforts with additional manpower, communication networks, funds, etc. Secondly, their participation becomes an educational effort in itself and spreads awareness of the problem because of the many people involved. Because NGOs often have greater flexibility than Governments, they can try innovative approaches to problems that have long resisted solution. Moreover, Governments may find it easier to work with NGOs on children's programmes than on many other types of programmes, since there are fewer political implications. Lastly, NGOs, through their local affiliates, have intimate knowledge of local situations, customs and people, they are undoubtedly the best means for implementing programmes that require large-scale person-to-person contacts, as many IYC programmes would.

Pre-planning and co-ordination

19. The full participation of the three groups mentioned above would be a prime requirement, but it would not in itself be a guarantee of a successful IYC. Indeed, the greater the number and diversity of participating groups, the more critical the pre-planning and co-ordinating function becomes.

20. UNICEF would obviously have a key role to play here, implying probably the co-ordinating function. It is experienced in working with Governments, with other United Nations bodies, and with NGOs. It has as good an over-all perspective on children's needs, globally, as any group in existence. And it has successfully worked its way through some administrative nightmares in order to plan and carry out the complex programmes needed for children in really desperate circumstances. UNICEF experience would be indispensable.

21. In addition to experience and know-how, pre-planning takes time and money. We probably have enough time, since the Year could scarcely take place before 1978 at the earliest. As for money, although it seems likely that there could be successful campaigns to raise funds during the Year itself, some money would be needed in advance for pre-planning and preparatory work. The money for this, in terms of United Nations budgets, would not be too important an item, especially if NGOs were involved in the preparations. Even with the economic crisis it should be possible to find the necessary funds, although we do not delude ourselves into thinking it would be easy.

22. The preparatory work for the Year could probably be handled most effectively by a small group of persons chosen to assure representation of the full range of participants. They should be highly qualified administrators on the international level, with a basic knowledge of the issues involved in an IYC, and with global

*We use the term "NGO" in a broad sense here, to include non-governmental organizations at the international and national level, voluntary agencies, and other private groups that might be involved.

contacts that would enable them to call on experts in various disciplines as needed. Whatever might be decided as to the composition and the structure of the group, it would need to begin its work as soon as the Year was proclaimed. Furthermore, from the earliest stages of IYC planning, the need for an accurate assessment of results would have to be kept in mind. The plans for the Year would have to include ample opportunity for feedback from those who are really in a position to judge its effectiveness in the field.

Selection of goals and means

23. There would have to be some selectivity in setting goals. The needs are enormous; we could not hope to meet them all. It would be better to concentrate the energy and the resources of the Year: (a) where the needs are greatest; and (b) where there is the most hope of bringing about some lasting improvements in the condition of the child.

24. Secondly, the same selectivity would have to prevail with regard to means. For example, a big 'world conference' on the child does not seem to us to be the most productive means for achieving IYC objectives. Small, well-designed regional conferences (with some overlap in attendance from one region to the other) might be useful. The Year should avoid crash programmes and the language of crash programmes. The IYC would be a time for working out long-range solutions and getting long-range commitments. It would have a general awareness programme, but the major effort would be to focus the attention of the right people on neglected problems, i.e., the people who have it in their power to do something about them. This principle would apply, whether we are talking about educating parents as to the nutritional needs of their children, or educating economic planners to recognize the special needs of the young child.

25. One might also argue that a certain selectivity should operate in regard to participants in an IYC. While all Governments should certainly be encouraged to participate, it is not necessarily true that all United Nations bodies would have a meaningful role to play in an IYC. There is no point in wasting IYC resources in trying to get every intergovernmental body to introduce some kind of child-oriented activity into its programme that year, unless that activity can be fully integrated into the general programme of that agency and into the programme of the IYC, and unless the activity has sufficient support to be effective. Here again, token participation would be worse than none. The same is true, of course, for NGOs. They vary tremendously in their interests and in their effectiveness, and it would probably be counterproductive to urge all of them to participate in an IYC. The quality of participation would be more important than sheer numbers.

Informational activities and fund-raising

26. As noted above, many are critical of international years for unleashing a torrent of words and not accomplishing much more. Still, the diffusion of information would be an important part of IYC activity and absolutely necessary for creating the awareness that precedes action. Needless to say, the informational material would have to be carefully developed and used. National Committees and national NGO affiliates could advise on the type of information that would be most useful in specific situations. In general, IYC informational activities ought to be kept simple and honest. It does not take 'hard sell' techniques to persuade people to respond to the needs of children once they understand them. The most important task of the informational effort would be to show each individual some specific areas where he could act and where his actions would have meaningful results.

27. Fund-raising would be an important part of IYC activities, and the publicity efforts connected with different drives should be designed to complement and reinforce each other rather than compete with each other, as is often the case now. Much duplication of effort could be avoided. This does not mean the elimination of separate fund-raising efforts - there is merit in using existing channels to reach as many different audiences as possible. But it does imply some co-ordination of publicity to avoid "numbing" the public with dozens of conflicting appeals. An IYC would give focus to fund-raising and assure a more rational use of the resources available.

III. Prospects for success

28. In surveying the prospects for a successful IYC, one finds some grounds for optimism:

-The central objective of an IYC is something practically everyone can agree on. Aid for children in need is perhaps as non-controversial and as non-political a goal as one could propose for the international community.

-A large reservoir of good will exists, an intense desire to create a better future for our children. The great majority of men and women in the world feel themselves directly concerned with children's needs inasmuch as they are parents themselves. This vast potential of good will, interest and energy needs to be activated.

-Innumerable programmes for children are already in operation. This is an advantage in the sense that an IYC would not be starting from zero, it would build on what is there. But it might also be seen as a drawback, since the existing methods of meeting children's needs are manifestly inadequate. Their total impact is insufficient, partly because they are fragmented efforts, well-intentioned but ineffectual in comparison to the magnitude and complexity of the problem. These fragmented efforts will no doubt continue, with or without an IYC. But this is what we have been doing for decades, and we have seen the plight of the child - globally speaking - worsen dramatically. Why not devote a year to trying to rationalize and co-ordinate these efforts so they will have a greater impact? The elements are there: an IYC could be the catalyst.

-Many societies have within themselves the resources to solve some of the problems affecting their children. Here again an IYC with its concentration of attention and effort, could be the catalyst to release local energies, spark local imaginations and provide the initiative for local solutions. Local leadership would be very important in an IYC, and certain NGOs are in a good position to help with this. Local initiative and NGO experience, combined with government and intergovernmental programmes focusing on the same objectives, could produce substantial results.

-There is a readiness among NGOs to participate in an IYC. As we noted above, NGOs vary greatly in the potential contribution each could make to an IYC. But preliminary inquiries among those having most to offer indicate that an IYC would have widespread, meaningful support from the NGO community. Many NGOs are, of course, exclusively concerned with the child, while others have significant parts of their programmes directed toward children. They have amassed considerable experience in the field, in working with Governments, and in co-operating with intergovernmental bodies. They are willing to shape their programmes to fit the framework of an IYC if they have enough advance notice to arrange this.

The NGOs represent a wealth of manpower and enthusiasm. Some of them have very efficient mechanisms for mounting world-wide programmes, whether the object is fund-raising, community development, exchange programmes, etc. For example, some of the world youth movements have undertaken programmes of matching local units in the developed countries with counterparts in less developed areas. The young people have worked together to dig wells, plant trees and construct schools, hospitals, community centers. Their concrete achievements are impressive, but more importantly, the young people from each region have learned much about the others. It has been suggested that one of the subobjectives of an IYC should be that the children of the developed world learn more about conditions in developing countries and vice versa. If an IYC could mobilize the idealism and energy of youth in the service of the child, the results could be very impressive indeed.

-An IYC could build on the most positive aspects of previous international years. We could benefit from these years, first, from a purely technical point of view, i.e., it is easier to see now what has to be avoided and what can bring positive results in mounting an international year.

Secondly, the content of previous years was such that they have succeeded or will have succeeded in stimulating thinking about several issues which are directly linked to the welfare of the child and the quality of his life. Furthermore, they have put the focus on development and shown the impossibility of considering any major social issue (including the well-being of the child) in isolation from the question of development. This has paved the way for those who insist that a national Young Child Policy must be integrated into development plans.

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Thirdly, previous international years have provided experience in interagency co-operation and given NGOs an occasion to work with each other and with the United Nations family on a scale unknown before. One thinks, for example, of the major role played by some NGOs in the World Population Year, or the major role that NGOs are playing along with Governments and intergovernmental bodies in dealing with food problems.

-An IYC could benefit from the excellent work UNICEF has done for children, and UNICEF should realize long-term benefits from the momentum generated by an IYC. As mentioned above, UNICEF has detailed knowledge of the needs of children throughout the world; it has found ways to work effectively with Governments, other United Nations bodies and NGOs. Its national committees have developed imaginative ideas for awareness campaigns and fund-raising efforts that get results. Moreover, UNICEF has a well-earned international reputation for "getting things done." Although an IYC would go well beyond the concerns of UNICEF, it is clear that the core of IYC activity would be similar to UNICEF's current programmes and could be shaped to reinforce and enhance those programmes.

IV. Conclusion

29. In reviewing the prospects for a successful IYC, we find enough positive elements to conclude that an IYC could be an International Year quite different from the others. Governments, intergovernmental agencies and NGOs have had considerable experience and some success in working together to save children during natural disasters and other emergencies. Now the same pooling of resources and co-ordination of programmes, the same intensity of effort, must be applied to a long-range, comprehensive attack on the 'quiet emergencies' afflicting children everywhere. In our opinion an International Year of the Child offers the best hope of bringing that about.

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