

Fourth United Nations High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

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HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

From July 9 to July 19, the fourth annual United Nations High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) took place. The HLPF is the central program for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. During this HLPF, on July 17, WFP, International had the opportunity to attend a side event co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Bangladesh and Rwanda to the UN, UNICEF, The Moving Minds Alliance, the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC), and the NGO Committee on Migration.

The event "Small Asks for Big Impact: Investing in the early years for sustainable development and peaceful societies," discussed the importance of investing in the early years of a child as the time period that establishes the foundation for a child's future learning, behavior and well-being.

The event included speakers such as Dr. Charles A. Nelson, Ph.D, Professor of Pediatrics and Neuroscience at Harvard University and Director of research at the Boston Children's Hospital, who spoke from a science-based perspective on the vital importance of investing early on in a child's development. In his presentation, Dr. Nelson explained how the life-long mental and physical challenges of adversity, trauma and neglect affect the development of young children, stating how, "chronic exposure to stress without a buffering relationship can lead to long term changes in the brain." Dr. Nelson went on to explain the findings of research he conducted in Bangladesh, where he and his team discovered that children from families who are at a lower rank in society, and thus had lower quality caregiving, demonstrated a weaker response to basic visual stimuli when they were under the influence of brain electrodes. In his conclusion, Dr. Nelson made the point that the effect of experiences of adversity, such as neglect, have on young children, can have far reaching consequences on their brain, biological and psychological development. For that reason, in order to decrease both physical and psychological disorders in adults, it is essential to address this issue of children growing up in adverse circumstances.

Another important moment of the event occurred when Dr. Rima Salah, Chair of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC) and Former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, made an inspiring call to action on advancing early childhood development in order to achieve a sustainable peace and the need for immediate action to expand investments in young children and families in crisis. In her statement, she also addressed how early childhood in being promoted in the sustainable development goals (SDGs) through special organizations like UNICEF, Open Society, and ECPC. She added that "the exposure to instability and stress in displacement challenges families to [secure] the protection and nurturing care that their young children need."

Representatives of Bangladesh and Rwanda also spoke, sharing their countries' contributions to and experiences with the issue of young children and their development. Dr. Anita Asimwe, the National Coordinator for the Government of Rwanda's Early Childhood Development Program, addressed the importance of the early years of a child and how engaging parents in learning and nurturing activities help with the implementation of the SDGs and the promotion of sustainable peace. Dr. Asimwe shared how, in Rwanda, UNICEF supported and worked with different stakeholders to create strategic policies. In 2018, these policies resulted in more than 27,000 young children, up to six years of age, having access to safe spaces to live, play and be nurtured, which included refugees as well. After Dr. Anita Asimwe's presentation, Bangladesh's Vice Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Mr. Md. Sherajul Islam, stated "if we change the beginning of the story, we change the whole story," and emphasized the crucial role of ECD and education in assembling a Culture of Peace.

Concluding the side event, a former refugee from Afghanistan and now a Direct Response Associate at the International Rescue Committee, Ms. Nargis Bigzad, delivered an emotional speech on how she struggled to raise her son on her own while working as a refugee, and for that reason had missed precious time to spend with her child.

It is agreed that the early years of childhood are a driving force in achieving peaceful societies. Investment in early child development policies and services can help to transform individuals, communities and nations. In this way, the urgent need to support and elevate investments in young children and caregiver programs is crucial, particularly in adverse environments where conflict and crisis prevail, which can have a negative effect on children's brain function leading to stress in adulthood. For this reason, the event concluded that with no effort to support young children's development, the achievement of the SDGs will be compromised. We cannot afford to leave any child or vulnerable young person behind, because the youth of 2030 are the young children of today.