



Belize's Opening Statement to
the Committee on the Rights of the Child

Delivered by
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Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen

As we prepare to enter into discussion about children in Belize, we pause to express our sympathy and concern for the many victims, particularly the children, of the tsunami disaster in South East Asia. Belize's membership in the world community affords us an opportunity to reach out in response to the plight of these children and their families as they try to renew their faith and rebuild their lives.

I bring you greetings from the Prime Minister of Belize, the Hon. Said Musa.

We are pleased to come before you, on behalf of the Government and people of Belize, to present our Second Periodic Report and to discuss the progress that we have made towards coming into full compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. To facilitate this discussion, I am accompanied by two senior officials: Mrs. Ava Pennill, Director of the Department of Human Services in the Ministry of Human Development and Ms. Judith

Alpuche, Executive Director of the National Committee for Families and Children, the statutory entity established by government as the primary mechanism to promote, coordinate and monitor efforts towards the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, as a small, young nation, we have faced many challenges in the past few years: four hurricanes in six years, an unfavourable global economic climate, spiraling the rising cost of fuel and primary imports and decreasing world prices for our exports. Despite these obstacles, Belize has made significant progress in placing children and adolescents at the center of development, thereby safeguarding their rights. This commitment to child-centered development has been reiterated time and again by the Prime Minister himself, my ministerial colleagues and other key decision makers. This is also central to our national efforts in addressing the needs of our most vulnerable population groups, with an emphasis on children and their families.

Belize has made many strides since our last report and those are well articulated in the documents you have before you. These strides are in keeping with our national and international commitments to create enabling

environments for the holistic development of children and the fulfillment of their rights. My Government participated in the United Nations Special Session for Children where it joined other nations in endorsing the World Fit for Children Declaration. This Declaration coincides with our national development priorities and along with the Concluding Observations of this Committee, was used to formulate our National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents, 2004-2015. The National Plan of Action, which is comprised of six main areas of attention: health, education, child protection, the family, HIV/AIDS and culture, will guide Belize's policies and actions with and on behalf of children and adolescents over the next decade. This Plan, endorsed by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on September 7th, 2004, ensures continuity regardless of the political party in power.

Mr. Chairman, the issue of poverty continues to be of grave concern to my government, especially its pronounced impact on children and their wellbeing. We recognize that poverty and its attendant issues rob a child of his or her right to optimum survival and development. Therefore, my government has placed great emphasis on the elimination of poverty through the development and implementation of a National Poverty Elimination

Strategy and Action Plan. This Plan reflects the Millennium Development Goals and prioritizes interventions in the areas of health, education, sustainable livelihoods and strengthening the social safety net. Additionally, the expressed commitment by the Prime Minister not to balance the budget on the backs of children, during times of austerity, guarantees adequate budgetary allocations for the social sector.

Now permit me, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee to highlight some of the major achievements and relevant issues currently being addressed in our development plans.

Recent years have seen a number of initiatives to improve the provision of health care in Belize primarily through the Health Care Reform Project. In the last three years this project has resulted in the establishment of public health centers and private clinics, as well as a pilot National Health Insurance Scheme. The decentralization of health services has translated into lower infant mortality rates, lower under five mortality rates and increased immunization coverage. We are very pleased to report that Belize has recently won the first ever Caribbean regional award for immunization coverage. We recognize, however, that much more needs to be done

particularly in the area of child nutrition. A national assessment on child nutrition is planned for later this year.

The Ministry of Education is spearheading a comprehensive education reform project designed to make education in Belize more affordable, accessible, gender sensitive and relevant. The Education Reform Initiative incorporated countrywide consultations, including special consultation sessions with children and adolescents and a National Education Summit. The results of these consultations and the Summit are now being used to inform the development of a ten year Education Plan that further articulates the National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents. The approach being used in the reform process is one of participation, communication and social mobilization aimed at securing national consensus and ownership of the outcomes.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, in Belize we consider the protection of children as paramount, therefore, we have been working consistently for over a decade on legal and institutional reform. Since 1993, there has been a paradigm shift that enabled and improved the level and quality of care and attention given to children in need of protection. We

continue to work to improve the system. Government has led the charge by enacting and harmonizing legislation and policies to bring them in tandem with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international commitments. The recent vulnerability analysis of the child protection system has identified the gaps in legislation, policy and practice and has recommended corrective actions. Likewise, the Crime and Violence Study provides vital information on the impact of crime and violence on children and adolescents and recommends actions for its mitigation. It is also an initiative to assist us in addressing the issue of children and adolescents in conflict with the law.

In an effort to ensure that all agencies operate within the same guidelines and that all children benefit from the same level of protection, national protocols are currently being finalized.

My country continues to struggle in its effort to securing timely, reliable, and relevant data. Government has made a commitment to reforming its main data collection agency, the Central Statistical Office, to ensure its autonomy. The National Human Development Advisory Committee through the Social Indicators Committee is spearheading a process to implement a

national database using the United Nations DEVINFO software. We believe that the current problems being faced with the availability of statistical information will therefore be solved shortly.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee as you are aware, changing culture and traditions are extremely difficult especially in multi cultural societies such as Belize. We, therefore, continue to struggle with the abolition of corporal punishment and the fostering of a true understanding of the importance of children's participation. The National Committee for Families and Children with support from UNICEF has had a long history of Convention on the Rights of the Child education at all levels. These initiatives, along with those of our civil society partners, have led to increased public reaction in defense of children's rights.

We are convinced that with continued public education and social mobilization the issue of children and adolescents will continue to be at the forefront of our national priorities.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, these are exciting times for the advancement of children's rights in Belize. There are a number of

excellent initiatives, some of which I have outlined, that have the full commitment and support of policymakers, implementers and decision makers at all levels. Additionally, the level of public support for the rights of children is at an all time high. These elements have created a momentum that will guarantee that we fulfill the commitments we have made to our children and adolescents and keep them at the center of our national development efforts.

Belize has all reasons and need to carry through on its national development plans for children and to capitalize on this ever burgeoning momentum. We are resolved, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, to do our utmost to safeguard the rights of our children and ensure that they are afforded the best possible environment in which to grow, develop and realize their fullest potentials.