

The Council of Europe's North-South Award

Lisbon, Portugal, 16 June 2003

By Albina du Boisrouvray, Founder and President

Mr. President of the Republic of Portugal,
Mr. President of East Timor,
Mr. President of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal,
Distinguished Representative of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe,
Mr. Vice-President of the Executive Council of the North South Center of the Council of Europe,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is with deep appreciation and much emotion that I accept the honor of receiving the North-South Prize from the North South Center of the Council of Europe. Thank you very, very much. I am also deeply moved and honored to share the prize with one of the historic figures of our time whose commitment to human rights led him to years of suffering, but in the end launched his people on the path to liberation, freedom and exercise of their basic rights: Xanana Gusmao, President of East Timor.

I would like to dedicate my North half of the Prize to my son François-Xavier Bagnoud, a generous helicopter rescue pilot, after whose accidental death at the age 24, we founded the Association that carries his name, François-Xavier Bagnoud, FXB, for short, and that seeks to implement in the field day by day the basic rights of the most destitute children, the AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children. This award is also a tribute to the work of the 550 FXB colleagues around the world who relentlessly contribute to change the fate of the most destitute by empowering them to access their basic rights.

FXB, the Association François-Xavier Bagnoud, targets the forgotten issues of forgotten people in forgotten places. So I would also like to accept the prize on behalf of the 200 million children, orphans, AIDS orphans and vulnerable children, who do not have a voice and who cannot claim the implementation of their rights as spelled out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – a Convention ratified for the past 10 years by all the countries of our planet except the United States and Somalia.

Children do not vote, they don't lobby, and when they are poor and orphaned, they don't buy. So they do not weigh on decisions of the affluent and powerful world.

Not much has changed in 10 years for most of the children in our world of six billion people, about two billion of whom are 14 years and younger. And the Convention on the Rights of the Child carries a legal obligation of implementation.

- Yet, 540 million children in the world live in dangerous and unstable situations;
- 120 million primary school-age children do not go to school – 53% of them are girls;
- 246 million children work in abusive conditions;
- 150 million children under 5 die every year of preventable diseases and malnutrition due to poverty and lack of access to basic social services;

- by 2010, there will be close to 200 million orphans, AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in destitution and despair drifting out into decivilization fueling the ranks of the already recognized 300,000 child soldiers, the 1.2 million children abducted into sex trafficking, and the unknown millions more who voluntarily enter the sex trade just to survive;
- and the list goes on.

Nelson Mandela said once: "There is no keener reflection of a society's soul, than the way it treats its children."

Something that I will never forget, and that remains as a watermark beneath many of the breaking new striking images of our 21st century history and media news, is a Sabena flight from Conakry to Brussels, unknowingly carrying two desperate West African teens who had smuggled themselves into a landing gear mechanism, despairing of their future in Africa. Yaguine Koita, 14, and Fode Tourkana, 15, hoping to find a better life in Europe froze themselves to death. On their dead bodies, a letter was found. It speaks more eloquently than anything of what we must do for those who live in a world void of rights, exposed to violence, disease, lack of education, exploitation and poverty. In parts, the letter pleads with European leaders: "We put our trust in you, please help us," it says. "If we are sacrificing ourselves and putting our lives in jeopardy, it is because we are suffering too much in Africa, and we need your help to fight against poverty and bring war to an end. However, our greatest need is education. We are asking you to help us study, to become like you, in Africa."

Education: Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our global world is complacently abusing daily Article 29 and Article 19 that call for all measures to protect children from physical, mental, sexual abuse and exploitation. And Article 6 about the survival and development of all children. And Article 24 that demands that children enjoy the highest sustainable standard of health and have access to treatment and rehabilitation. As an accelerator of abuse, we now have AIDS that is not only a medical crisis but also a social crisis compounding poverty and pushing the horizon of access to rights even further away.

We do not understand, nor apply enough, the inextricable link between health and human rights and how that link, when respected and implemented, is a powerful tool of poverty eradication and roots into our global community security and stability. We do just the opposite; we complacently let exclusion, lack of education and poverty fester and thrive, and this unhealthy social fabric breeds the social diseases of instability and insecurity leading to epidemics of war and terrorism. Therefore, poverty and health can become an unbreakable vicious circle. Education and empowerment of women are the first steps of rights access in breaking this circle.

That is why in 1992, I joined with the late Dr. Jonathan Mann, human rights and AIDS pioneer, and established at the Harvard School of Public Health, the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights to be an advocate for the rights of those most affected by pandemics, poverty, and neglect with a special attention to children.

At FXB, in our 90 projects in 17 countries, of which, India is one country with 35 states and outer territories each of which has at least one FXB program, we help bring up and rescue thousands of children within their extended families and local communities implementing the basic articles of the Convention, and enabling them to access back their dignity. But we are only repairing a few holes in the Global Village Social Safety Net out of which children drift into barbarity every day.

Orphans have frighteningly high rates of malnutrition, stunted growth, and illiteracy. Sometimes their relatives exploit them, or take their meager inheritance.

In Tanzania, in Zimbabwe, in Malawi, there are so many households with only orphans, the oldest being 15 or 16. They rely on food from neighbors. No one organizes them; they have nothing. So, in fear of having no food for tomorrow, they will keep some. It rots. There is no fridge. Ants and insects crawl over the leftovers. These children live, but they live in squalor and abandonment, indignity and horror. These children are prime recruits for prostitution, drug dealing, criminal gangs, and also for ragtag militias.

In West Africa, a rebel commander said that a 12-year-old is the ideal soldier. Old enough to carry an AK-47 and to understand and carry out an order, but too young to have any compunction against terrorists acts of human destruction.

In Sierra Leone, Ibrahim, a child who became soldier at 8 and at 14 was called General Shareblood, told a French reporter that he drank a cup of human blood every morning mixed with drugs, sending one of his 50 child soldiers to fetch a prisoner or an innocent civilian whose head he cut off with a machete.

Look at the evening news whether in Côte d'Ivoire or the Congo, you see children who are carrying guns and fighting. And who are they? Yes, they are orphans and most probably AIDS orphans as in Liberia, as in Uganda, the thousands of children abducted in the Lord's Resistance Army of rebels, as with the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

A Human Rights Watch report declares that 20 percent of the Burmese regular army is made up of children, the largest child army in the world. When punished, one boy was stripped naked and given 30 blows, and after his skin was bloody, the officer rubbed salt on the wounds on his back. The boy screamed. A few hours later, he died.

Another Human Rights Watch report details the suffering of orphans as young as three forced to work in near slavery conditions as domestics or agricultural laborers in West Africa in such countries as Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. In Colombia, child assassins as reported by the New York Times take cocaine, kill 10 to 15 people on contracts, and then get killed themselves or overdose.

These children are all rights holders. They should be provided with the mechanisms to participate in the processes and decisions that concern them and affect their lives. Yet, in the North we also witness that in London, according to "Le Monde," one child out of two lives under the level of poverty without access to basic rights; their parents are immigrants and are unemployed. In Russia, there are one million children roaming the streets, surviving by drug dealing, prostitution, and they are spreading AIDS. Migrant children are barely surviving in Spain and France.

The International Herald Tribune reports on youth in US cities where teenage girls are raped, boys are shot, and out-of-school youth is surging. As Jack Wuest, a teacher from Chicago said: "These kids need a fair shake and they are not getting it. That 'fair shake' should be access to their basic rights especially in the richest country in the world.

All these vulnerable children, orphans, AIDS orphans must be reeled back urgently and effectively into their communities with education, health care, nutrition, family love, and psychological support to prevent a global youth catastrophe.

There are some slivers of glimmering hope that need to be taken to scale at the global village level. For instance, in Kenya, President Mwai Kibaki proclaimed education free for all. Over a million new school age children poured at once into the classrooms.

There is also a slow improvement in Latin America, especially in Mexico and Brazil, in children's health and education levels.

But we need a coalition of countries for a better tomorrow to bring children access to their rights urgently, and worldwide, not border by border, but as a global societal emergency. The global crisis of hundreds of millions of children who carry the future of our global village – this earth co-op of which we are all shareholders -- is part of a global crisis of governance. The growing population of AIDS orphans is the showcase of this crisis.

All of you here today can do a lot. You have the power to integrate the awareness of this huge young population deprived of rights into everything you deal with. What better leader than the North-South Center of the Council of Europe to mobilize this effort starting with the European Community. And Portugal, as a spearheading country, and all the ambassadors here present to come together on this issue.

You have the power to encourage, educate, and stimulate governments to put this issue on the top of their agendas. At FXB, we have modestly started two complimentary activities. One is to get the mayors of the world to declare May 7th, AIDS Orphans Day. This year we got over 250 mayors and village leaders worldwide to come on board. And we intend to do much better next year.

The second is to mobilize the youth of the North to be the spokespeople of the youth of the South. This year 20 New York schools in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn collected money for AIDS orphans, and each class made a symbolic Safety Net out of a fisherman's net. They spread these nets across the walls of a huge gymnasium with little messages of hope fastened to the ties of the net. At the end of the day, in a similar manner, we the adults must encourage a youth movement from the children of the North to help the children of the South.

I will finish with two quotes from a girl and from a boy from the South. Little 13-year-old Gabriela Azurduy from Bolivia said: "We are not the sources of the problems; we are the resources you need to solve them."

And a teenager from Bangladesh: "Give us, your children, a good today. We will, in turn, give you a good tomorrow".