

**Speech by Minister André Rouvoet,  
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Youth and Families of the Netherlands,  
at the commemorative high-level plenary meeting devoted to the follow-up of the  
outcome of the special session on children, New York, 11 December 2007**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The more vulnerable people are, the more they need legal protection. This is especially true of children.

International trends show that many countries have an ambivalent attitude to children's rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified more widely than any other UN human rights convention. Yet it wasn't drawn up until 1989. Simply ratifying the convention is not enough. Many countries still have a lot to do.

The international community cannot slacken its efforts to ensure that children enjoy their rights to proper nutrition, health care, education, sanitation and safe drinking water as laid down in the Millennium Development Goals. That is why we are here. That is why the Netherlands will work actively towards these goals. Last February, the new Dutch government adopted Youth and Family issues as a priority in national policy. My policy programme 'Every opportunity for every child' was explicitly based on the UN Convention of Rights of the Child.

The UNICEF report "An overview of child well-being in rich countries" revealed ranked Dutch children to be the happiest of 21 wealthy Western nations, followed by the children in Sweden and Denmark.

We are grateful that children in the Netherlands are happy and contented with their lives. 85% of the children in the Netherlands are doing well.

But not everything is going well. Ten per cent of our children are at risk and five per cent have problems. They are neglected, kept out of school or even abused. They have criminal records and behavioural, alcohol or drug-related problems. They suffer from obesity, making them more likely to contract diseases.

As Minister for Youth and Families, it is my task to provide for positive conditions for children's development, so that the lives of the 85% will remain happy, and the lives of this

fifteen per cent will be improved. We can't do this only by investing in the young people in question, but we also have to invest in their families.

During the last decades, policies aimed at family life have been somewhat neglected. We now think however it's time the family becomes fully recognised as the basic unit of society and as such is strengthened by the government. A safe and healthy family life is of crucial importance for the wellbeing of children and society as a whole. In other words: when the family flourishes, society will flourish.

Therefore I want to set up easily accessible Youth and Family Centres in every town in the Netherlands, where parents and young people can find help and advice close to home. Parental support can be provided where necessary.

Of course, the government ought to be reluctant to interfere in parenting matters. It's parents who are responsible for children's upbringing in the first place. If they cannot cope and the community fails to support them, professional care and assistance must be provided, primarily aimed at encouraging or empowering them to take their responsibility.

Only when the physical, psycho-social or cognitive development of the child is endangered, the government has not only the right, but the duty to intervene. Interventions can range from forcing parents to accept help to – as a last resort – transferring the child to a foster family.

We also want to encourage children to keep a healthy diet at home and at school, and to take part in sports and physical activities. We want them to grow up in a safe environment, to achieve their potential and to contribute to society – especially those coming from most disadvantaged families. The Dutch government recently introduced a additional income related child allowance.

In international forums, too, children's rights are a Dutch priority. We shall continue to lobby for such rights, especially the right to a proper education and the right to grow up in a safe environment, free from violence.

Professor Pinheiro's study on violence against children deals with violence in its widest forms, including domestic violence, trafficking in children, child pornography, child labour and corporal punishment in schools.

The study will help the UN to make better address difficult and sensitive issues such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse and the worst forms of child labour. I applaud the

decision of the General Assembly's Third Committee to appoint a Special Representative on Violence against Children. For my part, I can assure you that the Netherlands is only too happy to help other countries develop and introduce plans to combat violence against children. Within the EU, we actively lobbied for the speedy adoption of the guidelines on children's rights, so that they will occupy a more prominent place in the European Union's foreign policy. The general Affairs and External Relations Council adopted these guidelines yesterday. The Netherlands is also involved in a number of bilateral initiatives. It will for instance fund the translation of a child-friendly version of Professor Pinheiro's study into the languages of countries willing to implement its recommendations. The Netherlands will moreover step up its efforts to combat child labour. It will pursue an integrated approach that combines political instruments with investments in education, poverty reduction and public campaigns.

Both the UN-study on violence against women and the one on violence against children published in 2006 make it clear that girls are particularly vulnerable to all kinds of violence. We believe that more needs to be done to ensure that this particularly vulnerable group gets sufficient attention.

The Netherlands has therefore decided to organize an international conference in 2009 on combating violence against children, particularly girls. We intend to do this in close cooperation with the United Nations. The aim will be to promote international action to stop violence against girls, with special focus on harmful traditional practices like genital mutilation, child marriages and honour crimes, and to enhance the resilience of girls. I will make sure that you are informed well in time about the structure and organisation of this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 2002 the children's declaration at the UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children ended with the following words: "You call us the future, but we are also the present". This is why we need to take action now.

The central goal of the Dutch Youth and Family Program is to contribute to a country where children can grow up safely and healthy, develop their own talents, enjoy themselves, learn to be good citizens and be properly equipped for the future. This in essence, is the aim of the 2002 Declaration and Plan of Action. Only when we as international community reaffirm

our commitment and re-enforce our efforts, we will be able to achieve our goal: a world fit for children.

Thank you.