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Chair

The Honourable Robert Nault

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● (0950)

[*English*]

The Chair (The Honourable Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)): Colleagues, let's get everybody seated and then we can reconvene. This meeting is now back in session.

We were in camera for the first hour. We're now in public. There are no cameras today, so you don't have to fix your tie or whatever, but there is live audio.

I want to begin by introducing Mr. Forsyth, who's the deputy executive director of UNICEF and UN assistant secretary-general. Good morning.

As well, we have with him Dominique Isabelle Hyde, deputy director, public partnerships division.

Of course, as you all know, we're very interested in the subject matter of UNICEF and the UN itself, generally. We talk about that quite regularly here in the foreign affairs committee. As Mr. Forsyth was in Ottawa, it was a good opportunity for us to have a conversation with him about some of these matters.

Mr. Forsyth, generally what we ask is that you make some opening comments, maybe giving the committee a sense of what you've been doing, what your role is, what the priorities are, and then we'll go to questions fairly quickly.

Time goes by quickly, so I'll turn the floor over to you.

Mr. Justin Forsyth (Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and UN Assistant Secretary-General, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, members of the committee, for sparing the time to allow me to meet with you today; it's a great honour. I know this committee is very important. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the Canadian people, their representatives, meaning you, and the Canadian government for all of your support for the United Nations, and specifically UNICEF.

In a way there's no more critical moment, as we were briefly discussing beforehand, for some of the challenges we face. The world is a challenging place at the moment for children and their families and their mums and dads. The United Nations is the centre of many of those challenges, alongside governments and civil society.

I think the interesting thing is to hear from you and your questions, but also the points you want to make; it'll be very interesting to hear your priorities.

I thought I would do three things: first, is to give you a very top level take on the state of the world for children at the moment; second, to talk about the challenges facing UNICEF and the United Nations; then last, to say a few words about what I think are some opportunities for Canadian leadership on some of those challenges and opportunities.

First, on the state of the world for children. I was thinking about this and joking a bit with Dominique coming in. I'm big Clint Eastwood fan, so I thought about how we could summarize this. One of his great films is *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. In a way, that's a perfect summary of the state of the world without being too flippant.

I think it's important to look at all three components. Among the good, I think it's important to remember, not just for children, but for the wider issues that were set out in the millennium development goals, that the world's made enormous progress. We dramatically cut the number of children who die from diarrhea, pneumonia, and malaria. We made dramatic progress in reducing the incidence of mothers dying in childbirth. We made huge progress lifting millions of people around the world out of poverty.

We even addressed difficult issues, cultural issues like female genital mutilation and early marriage, as part of some of that progress. Less progress was made on those more difficult cultural issues.

We also made huge progress in getting more children in the world into schools.

Even though that progress was mixed in different parts of the world, I think it's important to remember that in the last 15 or 20 years, Canadian leadership on this through various G7 initiatives and the United Nations and bilaterally through the aid program has been a huge contributor to some of that progress over different governments. The Canadian people have also been central to supporting some of that progress through NGOs, UNICEF, and others. The question with that progress is how do we now accelerate and build on that platform? That's the good.

I think the bad is that within that story of progress—and in a way this is a central point with the sustainable development goals that were set for 2030, different from the millennium development goals—we have left people behind, for various reasons. That was mainly in regard inequality and equity, and has to do with gender. If you look at places like India or Pakistan or Nigeria, because of gender or identity, a lot of people were left behind. It might be to do with caste or particular tribes or identities, or within that, issues like disability and poverty.

I think one of the biggest challenges we face, as is set out really clearly in the sustainable development goals, is that we leave no one behind. The strategies that we drove progress in terms of the millennium development goals aren't exactly the same strategies about how you reach those who are left furthest behind, because these more complex issues of culture and identity and gender are playing a role in this story of progress.

I think this is where recent Canadian leadership is so important with women and girls. This is a central part of that issue around equity.

● (0955)

Then in the third area, in terms of the state of the world for children—the ugly bit—I think all of us who work in this humanitarian world are shocked and horrified. Even though we've seen it first-hand, we never get immune to the terrible plight facing many children in different conflicts and emergencies around the world.

Obviously there's Syria, with millions of children displaced into neighbouring countries. Some of you, I know, have been to Jordan and Zaatari, but there are also Lebanon and Turkey. However, it's even worse in Syria in these besieged areas.

Recently, in northern Turkey, I met a group of doctors who worked with us in Aleppo during the siege. They told me how they literally had to decide which children lived or died because they had run out of medicines. They decided they had to use the medicine for the children who had the most chance to survive, so they had to let other children in their makeshift hospital in the middle of the siege of Aleppo die. These are terrible stories.

I think what has shocked us in the midst of this horror is how children are increasingly becoming targets. They're becoming targets in some of these conflict and are being deliberately shot, tortured and, in some cases, punished because of their identity. This is not just in Syria. I was also in South Sudan relatively recently, and the conflict there that has caused the famine in Unity State is taking a terrible toll on children. Children are being recruited as child soldiers and are being deliberately killed and shot because it's about wiping out a particular ethnic group, and children are being punished supposedly for the sins of their parents. This kind of attack on children is a particularly prominent part of these terrible conflicts, whether in South Sudan or in Myanmar, Burma—where I have also recently been—in Rakhine State with Rohingya children. In different places in the world we're seeing particular attacks on children that feel more brutal. They are not just more reported, but they feel more targeted and brutal than in many years.

Just to give you a snapshot, that's how we see the world in terms of the progress made and optimism felt, but also in terms of the challenge with equity and these more ugly, brutal attacks on children and the denial of their basic rights.

In terms of UNICEF and the United Nations, I think what we see as our job—and the Canadian people and government have been central in support of this—is how we take on those different elements. In terms of progress and how we can drive it even more, UNICEF, for example, provides half of the world's vaccines. We have this huge division called the “supply division” in Copenhagen, and it's the biggest humanitarian warehouse in the world. We work with Gavi, with the Global Fund for Children, and with your support and that of lots of other governments. We vaccinate half the world's children. The question is how we get to those children, in that story of progress, who have been left out because they live in remote areas or, for example, in the difficult border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan where there's a backlash against vaccination? They're not being vaccinated because there's an anti-vaccination culture developed or because they are girls—the most left-behind children.

As UNICEF, the first thing we're focused on is whether, by 2030, we finish the job we started with the millennium development goals, so that we can say that we can end some of these things. We can end children having their lives ruined by polio, and we can end children dying from diarrhea and pneumonia in the next 15 years or so, but we will have to focus on the most left behind.

I think the other big thing is how do we respond in these very difficult environments or humanitarian situations in South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and northern Nigeria? It's only been declared in South Sudan, but is looming in these other places. We're on the ground in all of them providing basic support for children suffering from severe acute malnutrition—which means they are imminently going to die—hundreds of thousands of children, millions in total, in all of those four situations. They're all very difficult working environments.

When I was in South Sudan, I flew to Bentiu, which is right up in the north of South Sudan. It was during the wet season, and you have to go by helicopter. It's like a three-hour ride, so it's very remote and very difficult to get to. I landed and went to a UNICEF clinic, and the whole thing had been looted. There were children lying on the ground dying, and all the equipment and the beds had been looted by the armed groups. This was in a Bentiu town that was protected by UN peacekeepers, a very good group from the Mongolian detachment whom all the local factions feared because they gave no ground to them at all. If there were a roadblock in the road they would drive straight through it. They wouldn't countenance any obstacles, but even in that situation, the violence....

● (1000)

In those places, what we're having to do—and it's a very integrated approach with the World Food Programme, UNICEF, Save the Children, and other NGOs—is to surge into the conflict areas by helicopter or on the ground, and treat as many people as possible for severe acute malnutrition, or provide medical support. Because the violence is so bad, we then have to retreat at night and come back in, which is a very costly and ineffective way of saving lives.

There is Canadian support for some of those responses, whether it's in besieged areas in Syria with the No Lost Generation initiative or with the money in Iraq from Education Cannot Wait, which is another big Canadian supported initiative where we keep children learning. For example, even in the east of Mosul, with ISIS being kicked out, we are now opening schools. I saw wonderful pictures the other day of children playing football in eastern Mosul for the first time after years of its being banned by ISIS.

We're surging in to get schools going with Education Cannot Wait. In these famine situations we're doing humanitarian work, not just food and health but also education. We think education is a key part of building hope for the future.

The final part—and then I'll turn it over to you, Chair—is about opportunities for Canadian leadership.

First, I think Canada's leadership over many years has been outstanding. In my previous life, I worked for two British prime ministers. I saw Canadian leadership at many summits, over many years, around the world. On child health and child malnutrition, I saw enormous leadership for many years, and on women and girls, on the whole refugee issue, and a long time ago on HIV and AIDS. That was really a turning point, I think, in Canadian leadership on those issues.

I think Canada has this extraordinary, powerful role in the world, not just through the aid budget, which is important, but through diplomacy and leadership in driving issues forward. I think this leadership in uncertain times, with the way the world is, is complex and difficult. With many politicians diverted by domestic concerns, we need this leadership. You know that. I'm just appealing to you from the United Nations; we need your leadership more than ever.

I can think of a couple of examples in my area, and I know there are others in the United Nations beyond what we do at UNICEF.

First, the one I would mention is this issue of the lost generation. I think this is so critical. In the both the Middle East and North Africa, we have huge numbers of children out of school in the middle of conflict. Take the example I gave in Mosul, where hundreds of thousands of children have been denied education. There's a window now to get them back to school. From a UNICEF point of view, every one of those children counts, and I know they do to you. This is also a key part of the soft power response to building hope and stability in Iraq. Whether these children think there's a future for them is going to be so critical.

In Syria, we see it all the time. I met a family in Turkey who had fled an ISIS area and told me about what ISIS was doing in the area of education against the real opportunities they wanted for their children. There's a connection between education and extremism, and the world has developed new mechanisms, including these funds for education and emergencies. I think that's a really big and important issue.

I know you had Malala here recently. We work with her in a number of countries. I think she's a living example through her work, both in terms of the importance of education for children and of winning a wider battle of values.

Second, linked to that and the point about Malala is the commitment of your Prime Minister, and both the current and previous governments, to the issues around gender, women, and girls. I know this is a cross-party issue. Again, I think there is a moment, particularly for adolescent girls, to make big progress on this issue in the world.

● (1005)

I think if you take what I said before about the progress with the MDGs, but also the challenges with the sustainable development goals, there are, in a way, two periods of a child's life where we need to do things differently. One is in the very early years, which I'll come to in a minute, and the second is in the adolescent years.

No one thing works in this area. It's about education, but it's also about early marriage and female genital mutilation. It has to do with access to health services, and it's about very basic things like having toilets in schools. It's about sexual violence. It's many issues together. There is no magic bullet like a vaccine, but if we can get right the adolescent girl bit of this, we'll prevent a lot of child deaths. We'll also get girls educated. They will contribute to society. We'll break down barriers, and that will contribute to the economies of countries. So there is education in conflict, adolescent girls, and I would also mention the whole issue that you've led on, which is refugees and migrants. This is an immediate one.

We've done a lot of work in the run-up to the G7 meeting in Sicily in a few days' time to develop a specific package of support for migrant children and refugee children, hundreds of thousands of whom are travelling unaccompanied. Again, the horrors of what happens in this situation are unbelievable. I was on an Italian coast guard boat off Italy, and they were pulling these children out of the water, and they had pulled several thousand out of the water in recent days. All the girls and some of the boys told me these terrible stories of what happened to them. One girl had come through Nigeria into Niger. She was trafficked and smuggled to be traded into prostitution in Italy. She was held underground in a cell by Libyan militia and raped every day for eight months and then sold into prostitution in a train station in Italy. All the children have these stories. The vulnerability of these children on the move is just beyond words. There are huge numbers—nine out of 10 children who have come on the central Mediterranean route, and actually also the route from Central America into the U.S., are unaccompanied and vulnerable and in the hands of traffickers.

We've developed a six-point plan specifically about this, which we worked on with the Italians and which we are trying to get governments and leaders to agree to. It may or may not be discussed at the G7.

Again, because I think there is Canadian leadership on refugees, this is something that is beyond Canada but is very powerful.

I have more but I'll stop there. Those are a few examples of where I think Canadian leadership could make a massive difference, which builds on your very powerful track record. With that, Chair, I'll stop and hand it back to you.

● (1010)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Forsyth. That was very in depth and I appreciate and know that you went as quickly as you could to let us get into the questions.

I'm going to go straight to Mr. Allison to begin the questions.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today and for the work that UNICEF does around the world.

I have five or six minutes and you took 10 or 15, and I can't even get close to what I want to ask in terms of questions.

You talked about South Sudan and about children and stuff. We see all these issues, whether it's maternal and child health, education, or vaccinations, and you covered all of those things. When you're dealing with a country or a failed state like South Sudan and you look at the whole list of things that need to be done, where do you start? How do you prioritize? Obviously you're going to places where people are needed. You guys do a whole bunch of different things. When we look at failed states, or close to failed states, what are some of the things you guys go through to try to figure out where we can help, where we can make the greatest difference?

We talked about it. We have the Dinka and Nuer who are fighting each other. We have ethnic cleansing. All of that stuff is going on.

How do you as an organization decide and try to figure out where the best bang for the buck is at that particular time?

Mr. Justin Forsyth: It's a very good question. Let me give you an example, because I think this is something that the new secretary-general is really on the money with in terms of his focus.

It's a lot about preventing those failed states, because it's much more complex to pick up the pieces afterwards. He's looking at how we use diplomacy, how we use aid, and how we use various measures to stop things getting even worse.

That really struck me on my recent visit to Myanmar. I went to Rakhine, where this conflict has broken out with the Rohingya, a Muslim population. My sense from that visit was that there is a terrible conflict going on in Rakhine, but it's going to be a much worse conflict in the future if we don't nip it in the bud now, because those young people—who have been brutalized by the Burmese or Myanmar military in response to what happened in the human rights abuses, and then put in camps where they're not allowed to leave—are going to be recruited by extremists in the long term. You can already see that beginning to happen.

Myanmar is a country with a new leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who is very committed to making progress, but within it, it has a conflict in Rakhine and it has a conflict in Kachin. If these conflicts get completely out of control, it will undermine the whole future of Myanmar, but it will also cause regional instability. ISIS and others are already viewing the injustices being committed in that country as an opportunity to recruit those people, and there's a big link with some extremist groups in Bangladesh.

This is one example. Kofi Annan has set out a road map for dealing with it; there's a big meeting in Myanmar. Putting a lot of effort into stopping countries from becoming failed states—pulling them back from the brink—would be the most important.

Somewhere like South Sudan, which is a very good example of a country that's tipped, the honest truth is what we do is sticking plaster on the wound. We're basically trying to keep children alive, because everything else has failed. We're not addressing the root causes. To address the root causes, you need leadership, and the leaders of that country on both sides need to step up to the mark. They need to stop the fighting, they need to reach agreement, and they need to move forward.

The international community can help in that, but a lot of effort and money has been poured into South Sudan, including from Canadians, and until you get the leadership from the politicians—the government and the opposition—it's going to be very hard to make progress.

The only bit that I think we can do better as an international community than we've done in the past is the peacekeeping part of it. That, again, is keeping the lid on it. It's not solving it, but I don't think the whole peacekeeping operation in South Sudan has been that good. When that violence broke out in Juba, it wasn't just the terrible rape and killing of some of the international journalists and those aid workers that we all read about. Thousands and thousands of not just South Sudanese, but also Kenyan and Ethiopian women were raped. The stories I heard when I was in Juba—about militias rounding up all the Kenyan and Ethiopian women, taking them out into the bush, and putting them in camps and raping them for weeks—never got international attention. The stories that came out were the terrible and unacceptable rapes of those aid workers, but the peacekeepers.... You have to ask, what was the point of having a peacekeeping mission if they didn't step into that type of situation?

In peacekeeping, we can do more, but ultimately in a situation like South Sudan, this famine is man-made and can be solved if we have leadership from the politicians.

● (1015)

Mr. Dean Allison: I can come back.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Sidhu, please.

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming here this morning.

Our approach to helping around the world is changing a little. It's not like back in the eighties, when we dropped rice from the top down. We're into more sustainable communities around the world. I was wondering if you could speak about the importance of developmental approaches that empower local citizens and support local efforts, for example, microcredit initiatives financing local start-ups.

How do UNICEF's policies work towards that sector?

Mr. Justin Forsyth: I think your point is completely right. I mentioned the good, the bad, and the ugly. I think on the good, and on addressing this issue of inequality, what you were saying is particularly important. I think if we're going to accelerate change on education, health, on climate change, and in addressing all of these issues, the solutions will come locally and from local civil society.

This is an area I feel more optimistic about. Even in places with big challenges, one of the things that has changed most in recent years—and my background is in civil society and NGOs; I've only been in the UN a year, with a bit in government—is the huge growth of civil society. You take a country like Kenya, which has big challenges. It's a democracy but it has big challenges in governance. The big difference from 10 or 15 years ago is that civil society is really strong; the media is really strong. There are challenges but there's also an enormous amount of scrutiny. On the ground, you have micro-credit, women's empowerment programs, health clinics, and schools.

It's not just civil society, however. The other big change is the private sector, where the local corporations are making the difference. I think our job, as UNICEF, is not always to do it. Our power is that we can help bring together some of those players. You take a place like Kenya, where we're working in the north. It's very poor—it's almost like two separate countries. Wajir and places in northern Kenya are as poor as anywhere in Africa, while the rest of Kenya has seen an enormous amount of progress. We're working with Kenyan banks on credit schemes, with Safaricom on using mobile technology to transfer cash payments, and with Kenyan NGOs to make sure there are health and education improvements for the most left behind. What UNICEF can do with the United Nations is to convene these different groups, not try to do it all. I think the local link to the global is a really powerful chain. I think your point is exactly right.

● (1020)

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Are those approaches being received well on the ground.

Mr. Justin Forsyth: Yes, they are. I think that everyone believes—and I know you would say this as politicians in Canada—local change is what is sustainable in the end. This is true of the big international organizations. At UN agencies like UNICEF, we are local. A lot of our staff are local and our structures are local, but the real locals are local NGOs, local civil society, local government. One of the other things that is changing is the growth of town and city governments and their role as change agents. We've seen that a lot in places like India, but we're now seeing it in places like Nigeria—mayors and cities are becoming powerful change agents.

As for how you combine all of that, part of our job is to bring people together and to help work on that with government. The only caution I would give is that in places where there's a lot of violence, civil society and NGOs can also become fronts for some of those groups. You have to understand the politics. We see this in many areas. You can get caught up in the politics, and NGOs can just be the pet of a militia leader or a politician. This is something you have to understand to be able to navigate the political complexities.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

Hélène Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Forsyth, thank you for your very interesting presentation and for suggesting areas in which Canada can show leadership and where it is already doing so.

If I may, I would like to add just one thing to your presentation. If Canada had set a deadline for increasing its international development contributions to 0.7% of GDP, as Great Britain has bravely done, that would be very beneficial.

That said, my question goes beyond the exceptional work you do for children around the world.

What is the current or expected impact of the new U.S. administration on UNICEF and other parts of your organization?

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Justin Forsyth: Thank you.

Those are big questions. On the 0.7%, we hope Canada will move toward 0.7%. As you say, it's an important target. I think it's part of actual leadership in the world. I think Canada has had an enormous impact not just through providing money but also through taking leadership on many issues, over many years, whether on child health and maternal mortality or on the issue around women's and girls' empowerment, and on refugees. But the aid money complements and builds and helps lever that leadership even more.

I know it's a journey to get to 0.7%, having seen it in the U.K. It takes many years, but I think that having a plan to get closer and closer to it is very important. Even though aid is not the magic solution to all of these problems, it is part of the solution; and again, in these uncertain times, it's an important part of that mix of strategies that's needed to address all the problems that we've talked about today.

In terms of the U.S. administration, as you know, UNICEF's biggest supporter historically has been the U.S. in terms of money. Interestingly, it's the U.S. administration and the U.S. public. We raise more money from the U.S. public and have more supporters in the U.S. than almost anywhere in the world—not per capita, but in terms of absolute numbers.

There are some encouraging signs. This year in terms of the proposals that have gone to Congress, our core income is actually going up under this administration. That isn't the case for all UN agencies, but what we don't know is about 2018 and 2019, and what the proposals will be then. I think the honest answer to your question is that we don't know. We're talking to the U.S. administration, but they have many issues on their agenda. I'm not sure we're top of their list at the moment, so I don't know what the final outcome will be. We're hopeful that we'll be able to maintain this very powerful partnership with the U.S. government and with this administration. We have many friends from all different parties on the Hill. We also have friends in this administration, too, but it's too early to know what the long-term impact of any U.S. decisions will be on either UNICEF or the UN.

Our job, as a UN agency, is to make the case about the impact and the results we're achieving on the ground and, hopefully, through that dialogue they will also then see the benefit of investing in children.

A bit like we'll be saying at the G7 summit in a few weeks' time, I hope that even if you disagree on some of these bigger issues, actually everyone can agree on children. In a way, that's our message.

● (1025)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: You made some very pertinent points about the importance of education in preventing extremism in difficult situations, such as in Syria, in refugee camps in the Central African Republic, and elsewhere.

Do you also work with the Global Partnership for Education? Do you have a partnership with that organization?

[*English*]

Mr. Justin Forsyth: We do, and we're on the board of it. We're a partner, so the Global Partnership for Education in a way creates a strategy and mobilizes that to have a replenishment, and creates money.

There are also proposals on the table for a new financing facility for education that's being considered behind closed doors at the moment, but it may come to light at the G20 summit that Chancellor Merkel is hosting. It feels to me that there's a lot of discussion at the moment about what more we need to do on education.

There's a big focus on adolescent girls particularly, but also on how we do education in conflict. That's where the link comes in and why Canada's support has been so important as part of this No Lost Generation initiative. The most important counter to extremism is hope, and the biggest factor in a child's life is hope.

My personal view after spending the last five or six years in Europe on the Syria crisis—and Dominique should say something on this, as she was our country representative in Jordan and knows this very well—is that a lot of people began to move to Europe when they saw there was no hope for their children's education. It wasn't just the cuts in the food rations and life being very hard. It was that suddenly, after all these years of promises, people in the Beqaa Valley and in other places saw no chance for their children to go to school, and they suddenly thought, right, we're going to move.

That's about their moving as refugee migrants, but I also think they become more vulnerable to extremism and ideology. I know that in the Beqaa Valley, for example, where children are out of school, you see other schools popping up; and these schools are run by other players, and what they're teaching is not what we would call education. If we want to leave the vacuum to extremism, we will not invest in education. About half the children in that region are still out of school.

Dominique, would you add anything?

● (1030)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Isabelle Hyde (Deputy Director, UNICEF): Thank you very much for your question.

I think Canada must continue to invest in education in developing countries, and also in emergency situations. From what we know, investment in education, and in the education of girls in particular, makes a big difference to health. Canada has invested a great deal in all aspects of preventing early marriage, which is directly related to girls' level of education.

We are seeing something else in Middle East and in Asia. More and more boys are leaving school early because there are no systems in place to help them find work after school. Reforms and investments are needed in this regard. There is considerable focus on the education of girls and that must continue, but the education of boys is also important. We must also look after boys involved in armed conflict. Roméo Dallaire did a lot of work in this regard, as did Louise Arbour in her former position. She has continued this work as the UN special representative for international migration. Now she is advancing the cause of children and migration.

Thank you for raising that point.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdière.

[*English*]

We'll go to Mr. Saini, please.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Good morning to both of you, and thank you for coming here this morning.

I have two broad questions for you because I know that UNICEF has partnered with a lot of organizations. One that I'd specifically like to talk about is the ICBL, the international campaign to ban landmines, especially as we celebrate this year the 20th anniversary of the Ottawa treaty.

I know that you have worked with them in mine risk education and other programs. Can you give us an idea of how successful that has been and what your work has done? I know you also have put together some fly-in teams that go short term to different areas to help eradicate landmines, or at least to help discover them and deactivate them.

Mr. Justin Forsyth: I think that treaty and the progress that has been made have been extraordinary in improving the lives of so many families. As we know, this is about whether people can safely go to work in their fields, whether they can collect water, and whether children can go to school, so it has a direct impact on many children's lives.

My understanding, and I don't have all the facts and figures at my fingertips, is that in many parts of the world we've been involved in working with a number of groups and NGOs about landmines awareness, because one of the key parts of this has not just been clearance of, but also awareness about, landmines so that children in particular don't inadvertently pick up explosive weapons or landmines. We've worked hand in glove not so much in doing landmine clearance, although there might be examples of that, but more in terms of awareness and support so that these are really community initiatives. That has been in lots of countries around the world, from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and many other places.

What we've seen more recently, again, is the indiscriminate use of weapons, not so much landmines, although you're seeing landmines in Syria, but also cluster munitions in Yemen and the use of high ordnance weapons in besieged areas like in Aleppo, where these weapons have a disproportionate impact on children. When you fire a high ordnance shell into a built-up area, the children are the most vulnerable and get most injured. The types of injuries and trauma suffered by children is shocking.

I think what we're interested in is keeping the energy of the landmine campaign and then building on it to make sure that we also make progress on cluster munitions and other types of weapons that particularly hurt children.

I would again commend Canada for its leadership on these issues of many years. It's another very good example of how Canadian leadership has changed the world.

Mr. Raj Saini: The second question I have, and I think you mentioned the topic in your preamble, is about water and the importance of sanitation. We know that right now in the world one in three people still doesn't have proper sanitation facilities.

Specifically, I know that you have a joint program with the World Health Organization when it comes to treating neglected tropical diseases. Right now these diseases, which affect the poorest, and children are the most vulnerable among them, are probably the easiest to treat. What is the effect of that? What programs are you rolling out? Are you effective with them? I know there's no sustainable development goal that specifically talks about neglected tropical diseases, but you talk about universal health care and other things, so I think that's now being folded into trying to make sure that they're eradicated by 2030. What are your ideas going forward?

● (1035)

Mr. Justin Forsyth: This is another very good example of the type of coalitions you need to make progress, because on neglected tropical diseases and the wider issue of water and sanitation, I would say we're not going to make the kind of progress we need to make, and have already made, without these coalitions of governments as well as the private sector. The private sector has been a key component of this, alongside the World Health Organization, and many NGOs and people like Jimmy Carter. They have championed this issue.

What we've seen, as you know, in parts of West Africa and other parts of the world is enormous progress on things like guinea worm as a result of very specific interventions that have combined new medicines, but also awareness and treatment and improved water and sanitation. I don't have the exact numbers—you may have them in front of you—but the dramatic drop as a result of that intense effort has been really remarkable.

I would say that you can make that kind of progress on things like neglected tropical diseases, just as we've made progress on polio, and we can make progress on diarrhea, pneumonia, and malaria. I think where it's more difficult is with water and sanitation more generally—with latter often the root cause of some of these other things like diarrhea or even NTDs—you need a campaign that changes behaviour, because open defecation is a big part of this. You need to change behaviour in schools and in communities on hand-washing, which is another big part of it. But you also need a whole new system of cheap and available toilet facilities, pit latrines, and treatment for things like rotavirus.

It's about research and development. It's a product. It's a behavioural change strategy, and then you need the government to really back this with NGOs. I think what we're finding is that in the coming 10 or 15 years we might be able to make progress on specific issues, whether they be neglected tropical diseases or polio, but unless we address the more structural issues in a more comprehensive way, we won't make bigger progress. I think that applies to water and sanitation, and it also actually applies to health system strengthening, something that Canada has also championed in the past.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Saini.

Mr. McKay.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): You've made a presentation for almost an hour now, and you haven't mentioned the word “religion” once. Yet around the world, almost without exception, almost all of these conflicts are religion-driven. In almost every country that you've mentioned where there are difficulties with children, religious conflict has been at the root of the difficulty, or certainly a prime cause.

The small “l” liberal mind has an allergy to talking about the core elements of religious conflict, so I would be interested in knowing how the UN in particular, and your organization as well, addresses this. When you're going into an area, how do you engage the religious authorities so that the belief construct of the conflict is reduced?

You mentioned Myanmar. Well, the conflict there is a Muslim-Buddhist one. India is having difficulties with Hindus and Christians and Sikhs. Pakistan is a no-go area for minority religions. There may well be in Kurdistan an emerging conflict with minority religious groups. You know the scene better than I do.

I would be interested in your thoughts on how you provide aid and intervention without actually mentioning religious conflict.

Mr. Justin Forsyth: I mentioned a lot the elements without saying the word “religion”, but I agree with you. I think it is a big factor, and this has a lot to do with identity.

In every place we work, we have to address it in a negative form, and we also work with it in a positive way. For example, in Egypt, we did an amazing piece of work with Muslims, Christians, Coptics and other religious groups. They all ran a joint campaign—the first in Egypt's history—to stop violence against children, particularly female genital mutilation. This was an amazing campaign for days in Egypt in the pulpits and in the mosques. People all gave the same message. They gave press conferences on social media—millions of people. So, that's a positive example. We do that in many countries, particularly in these campaigns that have to do with changing ideas and beliefs, because as you rightly say, this is a very powerful part of people's ideas and beliefs. A big part of our work is on violence against children. There are many forms of violence. It's not just FGM and abuse, but also other forms of violence against children. We harness the power of religion on that.

But in places where it's working in a much more negative way, we have to navigate it and try to mitigate it. For example, in Myanmar, there's a government, but there are also some very.... I need to be careful in my use of words because we have staff on the ground and security.... There are some religious groups on the Buddhist side who are very aggressive in what they're doing. We sit down with those groups privately and behind the scenes, as does the UN, and we talk to them about the impact they're having. We try to change their behaviours. The United Nations involves them in all of the different discussions, and there are big staff security risks in doing that. That's just one example.

In more difficult places, such as the Middle East, it's not just the tensions between Sunni and Shia. As an impartial actor that only puts children first, we have an ability to talk to the different militias and religious groups. It all gets mixed up in politics.

I think what we try to do is navigate and change behaviours in practice on the ground, while at the same time harnessing religion in positive ways.

Now I think the question is whether that can be done on a even bigger scale. I think this is a good challenge for the United Nations, which has the power to convene. There are moves to bring together the top religious leaders to have a bigger impact on some of these situations. For example, the current pope is interested in doing that. On his visit to Egypt, he reached out to some of the leading Islamic leaders as part of this. There are some behind-the-scenes initiatives on this front.

So, I completely agree with your analysis. I think quite a lot is happening on this on the ground, but I think the implication of your question is whether more could be done. I would agree that more could be done on this front. We can't hide from it. I mean, it's definitely a big cause of a lot of suffering that goes on.

● (1040)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Kent, please.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): I have a question that is potentially a big one, but I'd just like to get your general thoughts on the topic.

Let me say, first of all, that I think UNICEF is a shining exception to the the UN agencies that have not managed to contemporize and evolve to face very different, changing challenges.

You mentioned earlier the new secretary-general's commitment to reform systems and approaches. Whenever we get into this topic, I think of Anthony Banbury's essay last year in which he talked about the UN generally as “a Remington typewriter in a smartphone world.”

The word “sovereignty” seems to be a problem in addressing contemporary humanitarian challenges. Sovereign states are supposed to be responsible for dealing with agencies like you, the UNHCR, or UNRRA in the West Bank, Gaza, and South Sudan, but very often the sovereign state has no interest in providing or enabling humanitarian support. Iraq, for example, is not taking responsibility for internally displaced people in the Kurdish autonomous region. The Kurdish autonomous region doesn't have the capacity to do it. UNHCR has a very narrow focus on what a certified refugee is. We see the same IDP problem in South Sudan and other places.

What are your thoughts? I don't want to draw you into an indiscreet discussion, but what are your thoughts about reforming the UN from the top down? You mentioned that peacekeeping is simply not working appropriately in Africa these days. How should we do that? There are so many countries at the UN who are entrenched with thoughts about process that have nothing to do with reforming, contemporizing, and instructively updating.

● (1045)

Mr. Justin Forsyth: I suspect you have a better answer to the question than I do.

Again, it's not necessarily just like UNICEF, but the UN is as strong or weak as its members. Many of the things you refer to affect the Security Council. If the Security Council violently disagrees, as it does on Syria or other conflicts, it's very hard for UN agencies, or any bit of the UN, to do more than pick up the pieces, or as I said earlier, stick plasters on the wound. We have to be realistic about that. It's not in our power. It's more in your power and the governments of the world to sort out the Security Council and to try to reach consensus. I think that's where leadership does come in. As you know, a lot of people in the world are looking to Canada as a country at the moment. In these uncertain times, you have an opportunity as you've had in the past—and you've cited many of the examples from the past. It isn't a new role for Canada to kind of lead from the front on this in international politics. That's your role as parliamentarians, but also the government's role. There are few governments in the world that want to do that.

In terms of wider UN reform, I think the secretary-general is very keen to sort out the bureaucracy and inefficiencies. Part of the UN that does need modernizing and sorting out.... On joining the UN, some of it shocked me. It's partly that there are many historical factors involved in this. It's also that many of our boards are governments and are also pressing for things that aren't very efficient in terms of making staff move around and how budgeting is done. There needs to be a lot of reform on that. I think we can also collaborate even better than we're doing.

I think there's a bit of a hidden success story here. For example, UNICEF with the WFP, UNHCR, UNFPA, and whether it's on FGM, early marriage, or humanitarian efforts, we're doing enormous programs together. With the WHO and UNDP, and with an enormous amount of World Bank funding behind us, we're running a new program in Yemen with hundreds of millions of dollars for child health and nutrition. We need more of that. We need to look at how we leave bigger results and change.

All I would say, as a relative newcomer to the UN, is that I think the UN is at its worst when it's not clear about what it's trying to achieve. I know that's an obvious statement, but if we're clear that we want to wipe out some of these neglected diseases or polio, or we want to get all the girls in the world into school, whether it's at a country level or a global level, I think then you get people rallying and bringing their different energies to make that happen. If we endlessly just discuss—as it feels sometimes in New York—process, then everyone just goes in circles. A lot of the discussion in New York is about process. I don't understand half of the jargon and I'm sure you wouldn't either. I think that's not just a UN problem. Member states contribute to making that discussion bad as well, by endlessly focusing on process, rather than big things to change. I know that's an obvious statement, but that would be my insight.

The Chair: Colleagues, I think that wraps up our time.

I want to thank Mr. Forsyth and Ms. Hyde for coming to brief us on UNICEF.

Some of the members here might not be old enough to know, but UNICEF was a big deal at Halloween in my time. You never went out for Halloween when I was kid without a UNICEF box. If you did, then you just weren't with it because that was so important at school. UNICEF has been around a long time and it has made a big difference in the world. We're very supportive of it, of course. As Mr. Kent says, we're trying to get our head around how the UN itself can move forward in a very dynamic and changing world that's sometimes not so nice. Canada hopes to play a big part in that.

Again, Mr. Forsyth, thank you very much. It was a very enjoyable and informative hour.

Colleagues, before I adjourn, this is just a reminder that we're meeting Central Asian ambassadors and MPs for lunch on Wednesday, May 17. Don't forget that you've been invited.

I want to remind everyone that we're working in two tracks here. We're going to start the development finance initiative study, perhaps as early as next week. We're going to try to run on both tracks because we want to get moving some of the initiatives that we've committed to. As for when that might start, we'll have that to you in some fashion in writing in the next day or so.

This has been a very good and productive meeting this morning. Thank you very much. We'll see you next week.

The meeting is adjourned.