

Children are Surviving Their Dangerous Early Years, and Learning

James Fox

Civil war in Rwanda, devastation in Mexico, famine in Somalia — such images sear our television screens and make headlines. The impression they leave is one of unrelenting poverty. Yet they are a small piece of a broader, more positive picture. The quality of life of ordinary people in developing countries has improved steadily and dramatically in the last 40 years.

Our study at USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation looks at the best available data on indicators of poverty from 1950 through 1994 and finds cause for optimism. The part of our survey dealing with key aspects of life for children: survival, nutrition and education reveals impressive accomplishments.

Infant mortality has dropped from 180 per thousand births to 67 per thousand. The total number of infant deaths has dropped steadily, while the number of babies born has more than doubled. The average 1-year-old in a developing country today can expect to live to age 66, 26 years longer than his grandparent born in 1950. And the gap in life expectancy between developed and developing countries has narrowed from 20 to 8.5 years.

People in developing countries are eating better today than at any time in recorded history. Food production has outpaced population growth for the past four decades. In 1961, the first year when data on calorie consumption were available, half the world's population lived in countries where the average person was undernourished, getting less than 2,200 calories a day. By 1990, that figure dropped to 11 percent. In the mid-1970s, 42 percent of children were seriously underweight. By 1990, that had dropped to 34 percent.

Seven times more people in developing countries are literate today than in 1950. Much of that comes from educating children. In 1950, 100 million chil-

Thirty-five years of progress

	1960	1995
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 births)	138	67
Under-5 mortality rate (per 1,000 births)	216	100
One-year-olds immunized against diphtheria, pertussis, polio and tetanus	5%	*80%
Life expectancy (years)	47	62
Primary school enrollment	48%	77%

Source: UNICEF *1994



dren in developing countries were attending school. By 1990, there were 738 million.

Education affects other aspects of people's lives, creating payoffs for the world at large. Educated people are more productive, more innovative, and better equipped to improve their own health, nutrition, and reproductive status. They become more affluent consumers and are better prepared to claim their individual rights.

This progress is all the more remarkable considering it has taken place during the most rapid population growth in history. Recognition that international efforts are achieving progress might

reduce "aid fatigue" by the public and Congress. It could also energize people to come up with creative, new ways to address world poverty. □

Dr. Fox is an economist with the United States Agency for International Development's Center for Information and Evaluation. This was taken from, "What Do We Know About World Poverty?", Special Study No. 74, PN-ABS-516. The full study is available from USAID Development Information Services Clearinghouse (DISC), 1621 Kent St., Suite 200, Arlington, VA 22209-2111; phone: (703) 352-4006; fax: (703) 351-4039; Internet: docorder@disc.mhs.compuServe.com. The text is also on the Internet: gopher.info.usaid.gov.