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Transcript of UNICEF Day of the Girl Child speech, 12th October 2015

I am delighted to announce on this third International Day of the Girl Child that my organisation, Street Child of Sierra Leone, is today launching a **“nationwide consultation on issues affecting adolescent girls’ education”** – a process which will be the prelude to Street Child putting the education of adolescent girls at the forefront of our post-Ebola strategy.

Street Child is fortunate to have over 300 social and business staff based in teams in every corner of the country, 17 in total – in rural and urban areas. Over the next month, each team will be dialoging with over 100 adolescent girls, parents and caregivers, community stakeholders, official organs such as local chapters of MEST, MSWGCA and the FSU’s and other vital partners such as NGOs and CBOs.

In total we will listen to the voices of over 2,000 girls, and those of concerned adults.

We will listen to their description of the barriers and challenges facing adolescent girls.

We will brainstorm with them as to how these issues can best be tackled – both in terms of immediate actions to help girls education right now; and also in term of actions for critical longer-term change.

Internally, the results will decisively shape the programme initiatives Street Child choses to pursue on behalf of adolescent girls.

Externally, we promise to share our findings later this year in a formal report, in the hope that what they disclose may be of benefit to all – other local and international partners already active on this issue, and those not yet significantly involved.

Moreoever, if you would like to be a part of this process in the coming weeks, either as a private citizen or as an organisation, we warmly welcome your contribution and would ask that contact your nearest Street Child office, or our headquarters at 49 Pademba road, as soon as possible

For too long, especially in but not limited to, our rural areas, the issue of adolescent female education has been neglected – to the detriment not just to these girls, but to us all.

How can it be right that when you look at the early classes of any primary school, you see roughly equal numbers of boys and girls, but by the time you look at a Senior Secondary School, especially in the provinces, you can frequently see boys outnumbering girls by 2:1 or more?

When we know that the benefits of educating a girl are massive. They earn more – an extra 15% for every year of school completed according to reports; they spend it on the family; they have less children, later, and are more likely to ensure that they are immunized and educated properly. The list goes on.

Many of us who yearn for a brighter future for Sierra Leone sense that there may be a window of unique opportunity in these post-Ebola days. One thing we have learned in Ebola is that everything can change – even things we previously thought untouchable: burial customs, other rituals, greetings and so much else. So if nothing is immune from change, especially when a change can be shown to be for the better, why not believe that the idea that girls don't need to complete an education or that it is somehow less important than boys education, can be changed – in fact eliminated!

On a more local level at Street Child, like many organisations who fought Ebola I'm sure, we have learned that it is possible to do so much more than you ever may have dreamed likely. In the darkest days of Ebola we managed to reach out to, and supply, 12,000 Ebola orphans nationwide in just a few months – we would never have tried to reach, 12,000 brand new street-connected children in a normal period: the thought to try would not have even occurred to us! Indeed when Ebola began we had started with a pledge, which seemed ambitious enough, to reach 1,000 orphans. But the circumstances demanded more – and it actually worked out. We have learned to dream bigger now: more is possible - we have learned that so much of the seemingly impossible can actually be achieved!

And so we have decided that this vital issue of addressing the education of adolescent girls will be at the forefront of our work at Street Child. It has been an important part of work for a long while but we are bringing it to the centre-stage now.

We are certain that so much can be, and must be, achieved on this issue. And in the interests of transparency and mutual encouragement it is a work we undertake to continue to keep the public informed of.

Thank you.