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Statement submitted by Half the Sky Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2011/100.



Statement*

When Half the Sky started its work in China more than a decade ago, the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary school education would have been considered chimerical for the at-risk population we serve. Orphaned children living in institutions where we established our programmes were thought to be too disruptive, too emotionally damaged, and too academically challenged to thrive in their local public schools. But the children who have participated in our early childhood nurture and education programmes have demolished those stereotypes. They have proved over and over — even to the most sceptical public school administrators — that orphaned children do not have to lag behind their peers academically and socially.

It is true that when we first start working with the children, there is very little indication that they will be able to thrive in a school setting. Children like RuoJun, a little girl who arrived at our preschool in Chengdu “full of fear and insecurity”. RuoJun always sat in the corner of the classroom, making no eye contact with the teacher or the other children. Gradually RuoJun started to respond to the loving, patient care our staff is trained to provide. First she started making fleeting eye contact with her teacher. Then, in a sign that our staff has learned to celebrate, RuoJun started smiling — the furtive smiles that signify the tentative beginnings of a neglected, emotionally wounded child’s reconnection with the world.

Eventually, aided by teachers liberal with praise and hugs, RuoJun became “confident and active”. She rode a bike with training wheels, completed art projects with zest, and became fully engaged in imaginative play. RuoJun’s teachers took the time to listen to her “doll talk”, understanding that for her, communicating through a doll felt safer than direct communication. RuoJun also made lots of friends and mastered playground etiquette. Her teachers wrote: “We often hear RuoJun negotiating with other children. After the negotiations we can hear the children cheer after they reach agreement.”

After two years, RuoJun was ready to move on to primary school, where she excelled in making scientific experiments work. One of RuoJun’s creations was an aeroplane that could fly “way up high and far away”. RuoJun also excelled in art, taking first place in a city-wide children’s drawing competition.

The thought of what might have happened to RuoJun without intervention, how unlikely it would have been that she could become the aeroplane-making artist she had the potential to be, and the thought of how many more RuoJuns there are in China and around the world who need patient nurturing and a stimulating learning environment in the earliest years of life motivates me to continue our work.

There is nothing different about orphaned children. There is nothing different about poor children. Every child needs what good parents all over the world provide — love, hugs and learning environments that give them the chance to be the children they were born to be.

* The present statement is being issued without formal editing.