

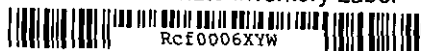
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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the  
Central American Presidents' Summit  
on  
Human Development, Children and Youth

Tegucigalpa, Honduras  
12 December 1991



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It is indeed an honour to be with you this afternoon at this historic Summit of Central American heads of state and government. It gives me great pleasure to celebrate with you the occasion of this very special meeting.

A year ago, at the World Summit for Children, on 30 September 1990, you made a promise. Now you are gathered here, keeping that promise. I am elated to be witnessing all of you signing the National Plans of Action of your countries, fulfilling the commitment made at the World Summit. The Summit Plan of Action you signed at the U.N., along with the other world leaders assembled there, stated that children's "survival, protection and development is the prerequisite for the future development of humanity". It went on to say:

"Empowerment of the younger generation with knowledge and resources to meet their basic human needs and to grow to their full potential should be a primary goal of national development. As their individual development and social contribution will shape the future of the world, investment in children's health, nutrition and education is the foundation for national development".

For too many countries in the world, that foundation remains weak and future development is imperiled.

Central America's leaders have long shown a unique awareness of the urgent need for decisive action for your children. You have often innovated when something new was required. Thus, it was in Central America where the concept of regional summit-level action for children first emerged for the world. From the April 1986 collective action of the six presidents of Central America and the Prime Minister of Belize to promote universal child immunization — the first-ever regional action for children by heads of state and governments — came the inspiration for placing children on the agendas of

the gatherings of the top leaders of the countries of South Asia and several other summits in other regions since. It can be said, without exaggeration, that the first seed of the World Summit for Children was planted by the leaders of Central America in 1986.

Also, Central America was the first region in the world to undertake a comprehensive regional health programme -- Health as a Bridge to Peace -- which received strong backing from the European Economic Community, the government of Italy, the Pan-American Health Organization and UNICEF.

And it was in Central America -- in El Salvador -- where the concept was born of "Days of Tranquillity" to provide immunization and other services to children caught up in civil war. This concept expanded to, and was precedent for, the later "corridors of tranquillity" in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola and Iraq, which have already saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in civil conflicts, and was officially endorsed at the World Summit for Children.

Your initiative to hold this meeting and simultaneously launch your National Plans of Action is another -- a fourth -- regional first that will not go unnoticed by leaders around the world. It gives the World Summit follow-up process an important boost. We know that the World Summit goals for reducing infant and child mortality rates are ambitious, but Latin American experience shows that with determination and commitment, they can be reached. Several countries in Latin America have shown what can be done. From 1960 to 1990, Costa Rica reduced its infant mortality rate from 84 to 18 deaths per 1,000 live births; Chile, from 114 to 20, and Cuba from 62 to under 11. These rates of reduction -- all over 5 per cent per year -- are amongst the most rapid in the world and demonstrate what can be achieved in Latin America under very different economic systems and political regimes.

Further, your governments have been among the first to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which takes its place alongside the commitments made at the World Summit for Children. Together they signify that world leaders are now according a new political priority to children. As the World Summit stated, action and co-operation must be guided by the principle of "first call for children" -- the principle that the essential needs of children should be given high priority in the allocation of resources, in bad times as well as in good.

Times have been bad, in countries here and elsewhere in the world. For almost half a century the world has been distracted from the work of peace, development and construction by military conflicts. During the 1980s, this region has had its work of building and improvement undercut by conflicts and economic set-backs. Fortunately, today, there exists a new opportunity for creating conditions in which adequate nutrition, health care and education can begin to transform your countries, to make your citizens' dreams a reality.

This meeting and the launching of your National Plans of Action is not a start but a renewal, for your nations have already made significant advances,

setting examples for others throughout the world, helping create the ethic of putting children first. In programmes in each of your countries, a solid foundation has been laid upon which the National Plans can be fully implemented. Among these, for example:

\* Central America as a whole has achieved a higher level of immunization coverage for its children by age one than the United States for its children by age two; In Costa Rica and Panama, you have managed not only to reach the Universal Childhood Immunization goal of 80 per cent coverage, but have surpassed it with current coverage of more than 90 per cent;

\* In Panama, thanks to solid social progress and accelerated family planning, fertility rates have been halved over the past fifteen years;

\* In Guatemala, you are demonstrating to the world how to promote the life-saving benefits of breast-feeding by the remarkable achievement of making all hospitals and clinics of the Ministry of Health and Social Security "baby-friendly" within the next few months;

\* In Belize, you are seeking to incorporate the most vulnerable into all social planning so as to achieve truly integrated programming;

\* As I mentioned earlier, it was in El Salvador, with its Days of Tranquillity, where the first serious attempt was made anywhere in the world to humanize civil strife, leading to similar efforts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola, Lebanon, Uganda, Iraq and, most recently, Yugoslavia, and to the World Summit pledge to replicate and expand the concept in future conflicts within as well as between countries. Until the Salvadorian Days of Tranquillity in 1985, the Geneva Convention's protections of children and other civilians had been applied primarily in cases of wars between countries, with only limited application to civil conflicts;

\* Over the past decade, Nicaragua managed to cut its infant mortality in half in spite of prolonged economic crisis and conflict.

\* During the 1980s, Costa Rica established health and nutrition programmes specifically aimed at helping the most vulnerable children in order to continue the trend of declining infant mortality, and now you have rates comparable to those of a number of industrialized countries.

\* Here, in Honduras, you have been innovative in extending water supply to thousands in urban slum neighbourhoods of Tegucigalpa through a cost-recovery system that is now a model other countries are looking to replicate.

- Costa Rica, Panama and Belize now have achieved infant mortality rates comparable to or better than Washington, D.C., which has a per capita income more than 10 times that for these three countries.

Some three thousand children are born each day in Central America; of them -- despite the extraordinary progress in three of your countries and other commendable efforts to date -- 240 under five died yesterday, another 240 will die today. This tragic toll of more than 80,000 child deaths annually will continue, if we do not manage to change the basic conditions of life for future generations. Success in achieving World Summit goals is important not only in its own right, but will contribute greatly to reducing projected population growth in Central America.

What is needed to attain the goals of human development for the 1990s is a vision, political will, and leadership, and your National Plans of Action are the embodiment of these critical elements. They set forth in practical ways the means for achieving for your people -- for the children and mothers particularly -- greater access to health, water and sanitation, education, housing and income generation.

I would like to take a moment to comment on the elaboration of your National Plans. My comment is actually one of congratulations on the process. Virtually every Plan reflects participation in a "Grand Alliance for Children" UNICEF has been advocating in recent years. These Plans evolved out of a long, sometimes heated process I am told, but always a constructive process in which every sector of society participated: government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, religious groups, educators, agencies of the UN system, the media, and others -- to name a few.

These Plans are truly national in every sense of the word. I congratulate each and every person who played a role in their formulation. The alliance created out of that process should continue to work together during their implementation.

Your Excellencies, I have two requests, two dreams to place before you. First, a good monitoring system will be the key to the successful implementation of your National Plans of Action. May I urge that in each country monitoring mechanisms be established so that the President, key cabinet ministers and provincial governors may review every six months the progress being made in the long march towards the achievement of social development goals, as is currently done with indicators of economic development. And then, continue to review your progress in this regional forum.

Realistic goals that your societies can attain by the year 2000 will provide incentives towards effective implementation and help gain international resources for meeting those goals. The National Plans of Action symbolize what we in the UN system and the international development community regard as the most important of all investment,

i.e., investment in human development. Children and youth are the key to the future of societies and nations. Investment in their development is, therefore, sound economics as well as the right thing to do.

Second, implementation of your Plans will undoubtedly require mobilization of additional resources. Much of those additional resources for achieving the priority human development goals will need to be generated through restructuring of existing national budgets -- a difficult but necessary exercise, since the needs in all sectors are great but resources are limited. Might not the National Plans of Action be the first and preferred candidates for allocation of funds released through the reductions in military expenditures to which Central America as a region has committed itself? Some reallocation within health and education budgets in favour of primary health care and primary education will also be unavoidable, if the ambitious goals you have set are to be achieved.

If peace can be achieved here and in the rest of the world, it should be used to turn the tremendous efforts and resources that have gone into the making of war and violence to the collective effort for human and social development.

I have a dream -- as peace finally comes to El Salvador and Guatemala, hopefully early in 1992, could Central America take the lead in this area of resource mobilization, just as it has in the others I have cited? Would it be possible to work out with each other a scheme that could be called "disarmament for children swaps", through which portions of your current military budgets would be reallocated to social investment programmes benefitting children and their families? Might it not be possible to mutually agree to reduce your defense budgets for this purpose by, say, 25 per cent in two years, followed by another 25 per cent in the next two years? After all, 80,000 children died last year, over half of them from readily preventable causes. Isn't this another form of war against children?

If you could take the lead on this score, you will again set a dramatic example for other regions. I can also assure you there will be an international response. For our part, we in the U.N. system would be glad to take up proposals along these lines with the donor community. Is this a dream, which like most dreams should fade away on waking? Or is it a dream which should -- can -- survive the light of day?

At the international level, too, there will be need for some restructuring of aid budgets if the international community is to match your national and regional efforts in favour of human development. Debt relief measures and increased aid flows should be designed to support the year 2000 goals endorsed by the international community. Your leadership in preparing National Plans of Action and your initiatives for regional action should help your friends abroad mobilize external support.

The presence here today of my colleagues, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, the Executive Director of the UN Population Fund, the Director of the Pan-American Health Organization, the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America, and others, indicates the strong support you can count on from the international community as you continue to pioneer in regional collaboration for human development.

In closing, I thank you again for the leadership the countries of this region have already provided the children of the world throughout the 1980s, despite the extraordinary difficulties your nations have confronted. Over the decade of the 1990s, I look forward to an exciting collaboration with you and the people of Central America in making your National Plans of Action a reality.