

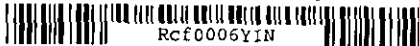
File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1992-0036

Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Parliamentary Earth Summit

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
5 June 1992



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



tem # **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01060**

ExR/Code: **CF/EXD/SP/1992-0036**

Parliamentary Earth Summit, Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant,
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

cover + 4pp + 0/b



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

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The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has asked me to wish you a most successful and productive meeting, and to convey his deep and sincere regrets for not being able to be here with you today.

It is an honour and a pleasure, indeed, for me to join you, once again, this time in Rio, for this important gathering of spiritual, parliamentary and civic leaders from around the world, taking place in the context of the historic United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). I am certain that the light generated by your deliberations will help illuminate the world's leaders at the Earth Summit. I am also certain that the intellectual and moral energy you generate here will help (as it did after the Moscow and Oxford conferences) power the many people's movements that are working to save the planet and promote human development.

When I address UNCED next Monday, I will make a special appeal to the international community on behalf of the world's children. I will urge the leaders and nations of the world to address the long-standing poverty-underdevelopment side of the environmental crisis with as much urgency and seriousness of purpose as must be mobilized to face the newer, dramatic threats caused by patterns of production and consumption that degrade natural systems and deplete natural resources. Our collective future depends on addressing both sides of the crisis without delay. I will stress that doing the readily "doable" for children could provide a cutting-edge for addressing both sides -- the new and old sides -- of the crisis.

The part of the environmental crisis which arises from gross underdevelopment, poverty and overpopulation is with us now, and the 1990s provide us with an unprecedented "window of opportunity" for dealing with it once and for all. Malnutrition and disease, early death and lifelong disability, paucity of choices, discrimination against women and children, and structural violence -- all the consequence of, or closely associated with, poverty and underdevelopment -- are today a readily avoidable obscenity that causes boundless suffering to billions of people and takes the lives of more than 10 million children annually.

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Fortunately, there's been a remarkable leap forward in recent years in society's capacity and willingness to protect and nurture those who represent our collective future. Children may represent only 20 per cent of the population, but they represent 100 per cent of our future. Within the vast political and economic revolution that is changing the shape of our times, a revolution for children is also underway, a revolution which many of you in this hall have encouraged, supported and helped lead. Its momentum can and must join that of the environmental movement to synergistically accelerate human progress in this decade of opportunity, and I ask your help in achieving this synergism.

In 1990 the historic Convention on the Rights of the Child became international law and the World Summit for Children was held. The Jomtien conference on Education for All took place and the remarkable goal was reached of immunizing 80 per cent of the world's under-one-year olds against the six foremost childhood diseases. As a result of this flurry of activity for children, two marvellous things emerged -- one lofty and abstract and the other practical and concrete. The first is a principle, a simple but revolutionary principle on which everyone is beginning to agree: children's essential needs should be given a "first call" on society's resources, whether times are good or bad, whether there's peace or a war is raging. The second thing to emerge was an action agenda for radically improving all children's lives by the year 2000. The world's leaders and governments committed themselves to reaching a wide range of measurable goals and over 125 countries have already issued, or are about to issue, National Programmes of Action for putting the World Summit for Children plan into practice.

If the promises of 1990 are kept, the lives of 50 million children will be saved over the decade; the deaths of 1.5 million mothers will be averted; access to basic education, safe water and sanitation will be vastly increased. These gains will, in turn, impact on population and environment, as parents have fewer children when they become confident their first born will survive. As UNCED's Secretary-General Maurice Strong has written:

"The effort to reduce child illness and malnutrition and to reach the goals of the World Summit for Children is crucial not only for its own sake but also as a means of helping to slow population growth and make possible environmentally sustainable development in the 21st century and beyond."

Spiritual, parliamentary and civic leaders, together and in your respective spheres of action, have a strategic role to play in ensuring that the promise is kept. As respected and influential members of the community, with access to political leadership, the mass media and the grassroots, you can stress the linkages I have outlined briefly today in order to:

1. bring together, in a broad movement or coalition, all those who are concerned about the future. Children can serve as a rallying point for an ever-expanding alliance to save the earth,

preserve peace and promote human development. It is clear now that we must preserve our planet if we are to nurture our children; equally, it is becoming clear that we must nurture our children if we are to preserve our planet.

2. draw attention to the way the environment impacts on children -- both their well-being and development -- in the present, and their future which is imperilled by an increasingly degraded earth. Remember, because they are so little and are rapidly growing, children are often affected the most by pollutants and toxins;

3. see to it that sufficient resources are made available for human development and efforts to eradicate poverty. The World Summit for Children goals are reiterated in Agenda 21 and there is an even greater responsibility now to come up with additional resources to fund national and international programmes to reach them;

4. make sure that children and youth are treated, not merely as passive victims of environmental degradation or poverty, but as forces for change. Children and youth are often in the forefront of movements for progress. If values relating to the ways in which we live, consume, produce and reproduce are to be changed, the children of today who will build and be that future must be educated in a new way, respected and listened to. The spiritual element -- the sense of the sanctity of all life and the responsibility we all have to nurture it -- is key here;

5. actively promote what's now being called Primary Environmental Care (PEC), which takes a leaf from our experience in primary health care and applies low-cost, high-impact interventions to human and environmental problems at the community level. The emphasis is on prevention and on helping people to help themselves;

6. do everything in your power to see to it that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is ratified in your countries, translated into effective legislation, disseminated widely and made part of the life culture of society, community and family;

7. work to remove constraints to sustainable development, ranging from abject poverty to external debt, from restrictive trade barriers to depressed commodity prices. And who better than spiritual leaders can argue for redirecting military expenditures toward meeting human and environmental needs, and who better than parliamentarians can make the post-cold war "peace dividend" finally happen?

These are a few suggestions. There are many other ways -- too many to list here -- in which we all can contribute to the revolution that is beginning to take place in global consciousness. We are in a position to help shape the new ethics which will guide us through the uncharted territories of this time of rapid change. You, we will be heard if we raise our voices to say, "Not another day of losing 40,000 children from largely avoidable causes; not another week of losing a quarter million; not another year of losing almost 14 million children must be allowed to pass", because the advances of recent years have brought the readily available means to prevent this ultimate waste of life. You, we must remind the world of Primo Levi's warning: that we join the ranks of the tormentors when we fail to relieve the torment we know how to relieve. Mortality must march with changing capacity.

I look forward to seeing the creative initiatives which I'm certain will emerge from your meeting. Let me commend you for the work you have been doing all these many years for peace, development, the environment and, of course, for children, and I urge you to redouble your efforts to take advantage of this decade of opportunity.