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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)  
Conference on South Asian Children

New Delhi, India  
27 October 1986

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I am honoured and delighted to have the opportunity to address you at this meeting which is historic both as an event and as an enduring process in the making. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is the newest among formal groupings of contiguous nations. Your seven countries have joined together in an act of faith in a common future, founded on mutual cooperation and collective self reliance. This in itself, I believe, is a victory for peace and human progress in our turbulent times.

At the same time, I observe that SAARC is the first among regional associations anywhere seeking to build self-reliant cooperation around the highest of human values - namely, a reverence for life. You in South Asia have set an historic precedent by taking the decision in SAARC's first year to discuss, agree on and follow up actions to accelerate on-going efforts to protect and enhance the lives of children.

It is this inviting prospect that has excited the United Nations Children's Fund, and our offices in each of the seven countries, into taking a lively interest in this conference...and indeed brought me to this extraordinary meeting.

UNICEF is privileged to be cooperating with SAARC in organizing this pioneering conference representing not only a spectrum of ministries and disciplines from the seven governments in their political capacity but also those outside government working for and with children. What is common to all of us, I believe, is a firm commitment to basic human development as the fundamental first step to development of any kind.

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40 Years for Children Au service des enfants Al servicio de los niños 为儿童服务四十年 на службе детей من أجل الأطفال

We have been encouraged by the decision of the seven governments to convene the conference, a decision formally expressed by the SAARC Council of Ministers in August at Dhaka. We consider this further evidence of a renewed commitment on behalf of children. And, as the world's advocate for children everywhere, we look forward to a political reinforcement of this commitment when the heads of state and of government meet at the forthcoming summit, and to a series of practical measures thereafter in each of the seven countries.

Nothing is closer to UNICEF's heart than the survival, development and protection of the 400 million children of South Asia. The future of children anywhere is not safe until the basic needs of children everywhere are met, and met in time. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the 40th year of UNICEF's work for the world's children coincides with the year which has both been dedicated by the peoples of the United Nations to International Peace and has seen the first activities of SAARC giving priority to children.

We know that a fourth of the world's children live in South Asia. But how well do they live? The answer presents something of a paradox: the grim facts and the bright exceptions, the burden and the glory of South Asia.

Of some 34 million children born in South Asia each year, around 4 million do not survive their first birthday. Another 2 million die before the age of 5. And not all of those who survive grow up into healthy and productive adults; millions are blind, deaf or otherwise disabled. There is widespread malnutrition, its interaction with infections of many kinds, the diseases borne by water and air, the periodic disasters brought by drought or flood or civil strife, and finally, the massive reality of illiteracy, ignorance and isolation which saps peoples' capacity to overcome adversity. The combined effects of these circumstances impinge harshest on the lives of children and those who spend their days and nights with them, the mothers.

Happily, we know that the participants in this conference have taken the time and trouble to come here not only to testify to this situation but also to change it.

There is, however, another side to South Asia which expresses the genius of its peoples, rooted deep in some 5,000 years of history. Many of my friends in this region trace the material poverty of their country to historical circumstances over the past 200 years or so, and their lagged effects. I see their point. But I also see a turn of the tide. The return of political consciousness to the peoples of the region has, in fact, resulted in at least two visible trends - both of which strengthen my own optimism about the inherent capacity of South Asia to liberate the full potential of its human resource - of its humanity.

First, each of the seven governments is clearly committed to assure basic services for all children within a stipulated time - particularly in the fields of nutrition, health and education. This commitment has gone well beyond an enunciation of policy. It has been expressed and promoted in substantive terms of programmatic aims, public investments and national

targets. The strategies and structures appropriate for responding to the needs of the people, in a situation-specific manner, will, I am sure, be reviewed by some of the best minds of South Asia who are participating in this conference. Let me, at this moment, make the observation that the current development-thrust in South Asia may be seen as an attempt, with gathering momentum, to raise the priority for human and social development to a par with the priority for economic development; and, indeed to link them for promotion as aspects of a single organic process. I submit that the most crucial plank of this approach is the survival and development of children.

~~Second~~, there are examples in each of the seven countries of social development having reached respectable levels in village communities, despite their low incomes. I refer to the varying and successful initiatives taken by groups of people in various parts of South Asia to break loose of poverty in its diverse manifestations. Often these efforts are led by enlightened individuals and they include some dynamic minds in the government. In the areas of their activity, the effects of poverty - if not poverty itself - have been tamed. The capacity of mothers to look after their children has been substantially increased. Illiteracy, including that of girls, has been practically eliminated. Home-based nutritional programmes, supplemented by community inputs, have reduced the incidence of malnutrition. Sanitation at the village level has improved. Public facilities, from safe water supply to immunization, are effectively arranged. In these population groups in South Asia, few children die or are disabled.

The current development indicators for South Asia, taken at the average, look formidable in their import. But averages hide both the extremes. There are countries or parts of them almost as advanced in some respects as the industrialized countries - be it in infant survival rate, girl's education or intellectual development. And the infant and child mortality rate for the SAARC region has dropped sharply since 1950, from 345 deaths before reaching age 5 for each 1,000 children born in 1950 to a level half that by the early 1980s.

Whatever lessons we need to learn for the development of South Asia are already available in the continental memory of its own experience. South Asia need only recall and apply these lessons, on a wider scale, with a renewed vigour. May this conference shed some light on the way ahead.

South Asia today offers a unique kaleidoscope of developmental activity: mass immunization under controlled temperature in desert conditions ... prevention of iodine deficiency in snow-clad heights of mountains ... demonstration of oral rehydration therapy for childhood diarrhoea for illiterate mothers in the remote rural interior ... functional literacy classes linked to farming and health care in tribal habitations ... programmes for preventing childhood disability and rehabilitating the disabled mainly on the responsibility of the community ... organizing women using bank credit for raising their income level ... promotion of birth care, birth-spacing, breast-feeding, proper weaning. It is no longer rare to see particular communities organizing all these activities simultaneously and reaping the

bonus of synergism - the result being more than the sum of the individual efforts, and indeed coming easier and faster.

South Asia, thanks to the development progress of recent years, has the technological knowledge and capability. It has trained and experienced manpower. It has a developed, or fast developing, social support service infrastructure. The foundations of mass media are being strongly laid and are already well advanced with the ubiquitous radio everywhere and television spreading rapidly. The tradition of the folk media and inter-personal and group communication is very much alive. Literacy is spreading steadily though slowly. What is to be done is known. How to do it has also been proven on the ground. The wisdom as well as the wherewithal for development are now right here.

The task ahead consists mainly of mobilizing the human and material resources for mounting an assault on poverty and its worst effects, and to make the development of children the focus of that thrust. I believe the processes of communication and education could make all the difference, if they are re-gearred to serve this social purpose. I believe the apparatus of public administration has to be readjusted and tuned to make for mutual permeation of different disciplines, services and departments - for all of them have to move in even step in support of basic human development. I believe the developmental centre of gravity has to shift to where people live, to the community. Once their awareness is roused, they will know what is good for them and their children better than any of us. Also, a firm basis in the community is probably the least-cost option for governments faced with a shortage of financial resources.

This is the context and climate in which I also believe that the targets the countries of South Asia have set for themselves are achievable. Some of these aims can be achieved faster, in the next four or five years, like universal child immunization by 1990, universal access to mother's milk and proper weaning foods and a drastic reduction of childhood deaths from diarrhoeal dehydration. We greatly welcome concrete recommendations from this conference for accelerating these ongoing programmes.

There are other allied aims accepted and being acted upon by the seven countries, like literacy (particularly of girls), maternal nutrition, family planning, safe drinking water and a cleaner environment. These have longer gestation periods, but they need not take, in the South Asian context, longer than 10-15 years. For obvious reasons, a renewed emphasis on each of these building blocks of human development can accept no delay.

Perhaps those elements in the national development plans directly related to children could be pulled together into an action plan for children at the national level with elevated political priority, enhanced budgetary support and refined strategies and structures? In such a scheme, the community of parents has to be at the heart of the development process, with a full measure of government backing and professional support. On the basis of these national plans for children, an agreed set of timebound aims and targets for

South Asia could be formulated for the medium-term future. The main function of such an inter-country, trans-disciplinary plan would be to share developmental experiences and insights among the countries. This, I believe, would be a timely tribute to the concept of regional self-reliance and cooperation.

We in UNICEF see excellent prospects for historically unprecedented progress in advancing the well-being of children with the active coordinated leadership of the SAARC countries. With priority attention to children and with each country drawing on the experience of the others, it is possible to foresee such improvement in the health of children that the overall infant and child mortality rate for the SAARC region would be halved over a ten year period, and the lives of some 5,000 children would be saved daily by the end of 1990. Such progress in improving the health of children through the greatly increased participation of parents, as with the prevention and control of diarrhoea through such techniques as oral rehydration therapy, growth monitoring, and immunizations - which give parents reasonable assurance of the survival of their first children - can be expected, on the basis of experience in South Asia and elsewhere, to contribute also to an even greater reduction in the number of births.

In particular, I would request this conference to assist in elevating to the political level discussion of the needs of children and ways of meeting them, so that the highest political consideration is actually available to children. I would also suggest that the genius of South Asia should be used to the utmost for the development of children by the seven countries in a mutually supportive manner.

Earlier, I mentioned the burden and the glory of South Asia. I am convinced that South Asia, on its own, can turn the burden into glory and that this conference will make an historic contribution toward bringing this possibility to reality.