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A Choice on the Threshold of the 21st Century:
Death and Disablement - or Life and Health – for 100 Million Children?

Submitted to the
Convocation of Nobel Laureates on behalf of
The United Nations Children's Fund (Nobel Peace Prize 1965)
By Mr. James P. Grant, Executive Director

Paris, France
18 January 1988

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In the four decades since the end of World War II and the Holocaust, the world has begun a dramatic change in global morality. Today, our world no longer allows millions of its children to die in the sudden emergencies of drought or famine anywhere on the planet. Whether the crisis is Kampuchea or Africa, the mass media ensure that people and governments are moved to the kind of action which, at the very least, prevents mass deaths.

Four decades ago, no such ethic prevailed. In the early 1940s, for example, an estimated 3 million men, women and children starved to death in Calcutta and Bengal while the world knew little and did less.

But the real emergency facing the world's children today is the "silent emergency" of frequent infection and widespread undernutrition - an emergency which kills and cripples over a half-million children every week.

As late as 1980, any knowledgeable observer, looking forward through the final years of this century, would have seen the intervening years to the 21st Century littered with the dead or disabled bodies of several hundred million - as many as 600 million - young children. These children suffered primarily not from war or natural disaster, not from famine or epidemic, but largely from the most simple of causes: the common, preventable diseases of childhood, readily curable illnesses, and unrecognized, correctable malnutrition. They suffered from the ignorance of their parents, or the lack of awareness and inaccessibility of simple, inexpensive interventions that could readily have protected them.

In the past, child deaths on this scale have been regarded as acceptable because they have been perceived as inevitable. Today, that perception is simply out of date. In our time, advances in knowledge, and in the social organization to put that knowledge to use, have brought the silent emergency out from the cold of the inevitable and into the domain of the largely preventable.

As a dramatic demonstration of this new potential in the 1980s, the lives of millions of children - reaching 2 million in 1987 alone - have been saved, and the crippings of millions more prevented, by nations which have mobilized to put today's low-cost solutions at the disposal of the majority of families. While the means are now proven, hundreds of millions of families remain unreached by this potential for virtual revolution in child survival and development - a breakthrough which, by the year 2000, could reduce 1980's child death rates by half, save more than 100 million children from death and disablement, improve the health and nutrition of many hundreds of millions more, and slow population growth as well.

In any civilization, morality must march with capacity. Those who can articulate the human conscience must now assert unequivocally that it is now just as unacceptable for so many millions of children to die in the silent emergency of needless drought or famine. Morality must be brought into step with our new capacity; the mass deaths of children must be placed alongside slavery, racism and apartheid on the shelf reserved for those things which are simply no longer acceptable to humankind. We must begin to establish that the rights of children extend beyond birth. Children have the right to survive, to grow in health, and to be protected and nurtured in their growth to full potential. These rights ought to be codified and embraced in a Convention on the Rights of the Child by which all nations, and all people of conscience, can gauge our performance as a civilization.

The question UNICEF therefore asks of its fellow Nobel Laureates is straightforward: As so many Laureates and less-recognized colleagues have contributed so much to create the capacity now within the world's hands, how can we - whether collectively or in clusters or individually - contribute to ensure that that capacity is not wasted...that morality keeps pace with our ability to change the face of the 21st Century?