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Message from Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival

London, United Kingdom  
11 April 1988



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"Our age is the first generation since the dawn of history in which mankind dared to believe it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the whole human race". Those are the words of Arnold Toynbee, spoken more than a generation ago.

Thanks to advances in technology and society the physical potential to actually alleviate the worst aspects of abject poverty has emerged from beyond the horizon for the first time in history, and though perhaps obscured at times by troublesome - and even formidable - obstacles, it is within view as a practical, attainable objective.

In all previous generations, a massive indifference to the effects of poverty was perhaps excused in people's hearts by a lack of clear awareness of the extent and conditions of the needy in remote places, or by the reality that there was so little which could be done. Limited resources and knowledge made poverty and poor health the lot of the majority of humankind.

Today no such justifications exist. We need not seek far to find images of what life is like for one billion of our fellow humans living in gross poverty - conditions which, for example, permit 38,000 young children to die each day and a comparable number to be crippled for life, the vast majority from causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures or preventions. And we cannot escape the fact that improving these conditions is now well within human reach.

Developments in science, technology, mass communications and new approaches to political and community organization have combined to create a truly revolutionary new capacity to extend the benefits of modern progress to the poor majority who have traditionally been left behind by societal advancements.

Those of us working in the field of child health are privileged with a preview of what the synergistic combination of these forces could mean to the future of humankind, for breakthroughs are being pioneered in this arena - breakthroughs which are now also applicable to a broad spectrum of other basic needs.

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 thecriplings of millions more prevented, by nations which have mobilized to put today's low-cost health solutions at the disposal of the majority of families. While the means are now proven, hundreds of millions of families still remain unreached by this potential for a 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.

This unprecedented possibility presents a new level of challenge to all of humankind, and indeed, a new level of responsibility.

It has become clear that if the challenge is to be met, it will be met by a social movement rather than by a medical movement alone. What is needed is a society-wide alliance of all those who can communicate with and support parents in doing what can now be done. Only such a Grand Alliance for Children can create the informed public demand for, and practical knowledge of, those methods which could bring about the revolution in child survival and development.

Today we can report that such a Grand Alliance has begun to gather, and that among the strongest pillars of that vast network which is coordinating action to improve the well-being of the world's children, are spiritual and parliamentary leaders.

Thus, for example, parliamentarians of Italy have been frontrunners, putting into law development assistance approaches aimed at meeting basic human needs - and voting massive increases in overseas development assistance. They have backed child survival and development efforts worldwide, and especially in Africa, with tremendous resources. Parliamentarians in the United States were among the first groups to recognize the historic potential of the Child Survival and Development Revolution (CSDR), to endorse its activities, to institute relevant programmes, and to put substantial money behind these efforts. Elsewhere in the world it has been parliamentarians who have insisted that the needs of children assume their rightful place high on political agendas, and have assured that the path of accelerating efforts on behalf of children and women is cleared of obstacles.

At the same time, spiritual leaders from throughout the world - priests, imams and rabbis - have encouraged literally millions of families to adapt simple low-cost practices capable of saving the lives and improving the well-being of their children. In country after country, the role of religious groups has been particularly dramatic in accelerated immunization programmes.

In Turkey, as just one of now many examples, imams preached simultaneously from each of the country's 54,000 mosques on the Friday evening before the start of the first national immunization campaign in 1985. The sermon, based on the teachings of the Quran, reminded the congregation that caring for children's health was a religious and national duty, and that children should be immunized during the campaign. Messages were included in religious broadcasts on radio and television, and many imams exerted their influence in house-to-house visits. On vaccination days, approximately 1,000 mosques were used as vaccination centres. That first campaign resulted in immunization of 5 million young children against the six main child-killing diseases, which had, the previous year, taken the lives of more than 30,000 Turkish children and crippled tens of thousands more. By the end of the 1985 programme, 85 percent of all young Turks were fully immunized against these dread diseases.

A chapter of history is already filled with the role that the Catholic Church has played in negotiating repeated de facto cease-fires in war-torn El Salvador in order to allow the safe conduct of immunization programmes. The Church undertook the vital mission of encouraging all parties and all sectors of the country to unite in this valiant effort - one which exemplified the highest of our humane ideals and has already served to inspire several other nations to do likewise. The full hierarchy of the Church was engaged, from the national to the parish level, in advocacy, education, exhortation, and participation as vaccinators and aides.

Even as this conference convenes, El Salvador, in its fourth year of this programme, is today conducting its third "day of tranquillity" for 1988, and is now saving the lives of more children each year than all killed annually in the tragic internal conflict.

Much has been done, yet even in this arena of child health, where groundbreaking efforts are pointing the way to harnessing the yet-unleashed potential of social mobilization by manifesting popular and political will, the weekly global child death toll which is more than double the number of lives lost at Hiroshima serves as a grim reminder that much much more remains to be done.

In addition to serving on the front lines in developing countries and to mobilizing financial resources from the relatively advantaged to help the disadvantaged, religious structures - Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Jewish - have also helped in creating a new ethic of "children first" - a concept heretofore honoured by most national societies far more in words than deeds. The emerging consensus on a Convention on the Rights of the Child is one consequence, but a major acceleration of such efforts is still required to make this a reality.

In any civilization, morality must march with capacity. Those whose social domain involves the human conscience as well as those who govern societies must assert unequivocally that it is now unacceptable for so many millions of children to die of needless malnutrition and infections. The mass deaths of children must be placed alongside slavery, racism, colonialism, and apartheid on the shelf reserved for those things which are simply no longer acceptable to humankind. And we must begin to establish that children have the right to survive, to grow in health, and to be protected and nurtured in their growth to full potential.

This global forum, by its focus on human survival, is a conference about the future. It is appropriate that the United Nations, whose charter begins with the words, "We the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations...", be represented at this gathering by UNICEF - the world's nations' instrument for the survival, protection and development of its children - our most precious and tangible link to the future.

Already we are partners in a gathering grand alliance for children and for human survival, yet we have barely begun our work. The spiritual and parliamentary leaders gathered here represent an ironclad framework for the global network which is now being tested to discern whether we, as a civilization, can rise to meet the challenge of Toynbee's vision - can allocate our vast resources and focus our efforts to overcome the worst of mass human sufferings associated with poverty, and to do so in this millenium, as our gift to the next. This historic possibility will become reality, and we will stand the challenge, if - and only if - we work together even more actively, for the children - and the future - of the world.