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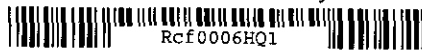
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“Social Mobilization for Child Survival and Development”

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Social Mobilization for Child Survival and Development

by

James P. Grant

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- an article submitted for the Fall 1988 issue of -

JUNIOR LEAGUE REVIEW

There's a revolution going on - a revolution for children - and it is already affecting millions of lives. This revolution is spreading in country after country in the developing world, and it is even having its effects in the industrialized world. It is a revolution that could very well change the world.

There are two unprecedented developments converging to create this revolution. The first emerged more than a decade ago as a manifestation of "development". People became organized in small villages and towns. There are groups for farmers and women and factory workers and retailers. There are training programmes and schools to the point that, for the first time in history, most young mothers in their 20s and 30s can read and write. With increased incomes, people bought equipment and supplies. They linked with other groups in other communities and in networks. There are radios in almost every home, and at least a television or two in every village, and frequently in many homes, with the result that people throughout a country can know what is going on and how to do things. Thus people in less developed countries, while they have only the per capita incomes of, for example, the United States during its 1776 Revolutionary era, have a capacity to communicate not achieved in the industrialized world until the mid 20th century.

The evolution of this new ability to communicate coincided with the realization that major, grossly underutilized technological advances of recent years can bring about revolutionary improvement in the well being of children at extremely low cost - a cost so low that virtually all countries can afford them with a modicum of international cooperation, if only they can be combined with the new capacity to communicate with the poor who are most in need of these recent technological advances. Thus a bridge has formed to span that all-important gap between available medical technology and knowledge and its use by those for whom it could make the vital difference.

The United Nations has called this synergistic combination of forces the potential for a Child Survival and Development Revolution (CSDR). The actual medical techniques are becoming increasingly familiar, and include immunization against the six main child-killing diseases - measles, polio, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), diphtheria, and tuberculosis; the remarkably simple and inexpensive Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) to combat the number-one killer of young children - diarrhoeal dehydration; a return to the practice of breastfeeding with proper weaning; growth monitoring; and family spacing.

As a dramatic demonstration of the new potential of the CSDR 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 1980s 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.

If the challenge is to be met, it is clear today that it will be met by a social movement rather than by a medical movement alone. What is needed today to realize the unprecedented potential of the CSDR is a society-wide alliance of all those who can communicate with and support parents in doing what can now be done - teachers and religious leaders, mass media and government agencies, voluntary organizations and people's movements, business and labour unions, professional associations and conventional health services. Only such a "Grand Alliance for Children" can create the informed public demand for, and practical knowledge of, those methods which can bring about the revolution in child survival and development.

Fortunately, just such a network is developing. The backbone of support to parents and to the communities and governments who work with them to make these basic health approaches work has been the involvement of social alliances which span international borders and link distant nations in the social mobilization process. Rotary International has undertaken a commitment to raise \$120 million to support polio immunizations - and nearly doubled its goal 18 years before the target date! And Rotarians have been deeply involved in countries with active programmes. The International Pediatrics Association has taken a leadership role in promoting these techniques. Jaycees International has recently taken on a massive campaign - country by country - to combat the lethal effects of diarrhoeal dehydration. Religious institutions such as the Catholic Church and the El Azar University in Cairo have not only given broadscale support but have taken the fore in promoting individual campaigns and long-term primary health care practices. Fortunately, these examples name only a few of a growing number of groups which are joining this crucial revolution for the survival and development of children.

Members of the Junior League can participate collectively through local chapters, or through a variety of individual actions. For example, your personal lifestyle can have a tremendous impact, since Junior Leagues are prominent in countries which set the example and establish standards for the rest of the world. If women in these countries breastfeed their infants, and if parents have their children immunized, or ensure that oral rehydration therapy is used for their children when the need arises instead of costly high-technology remedies - this helps set the standard for the rest of the world. There are also a number of ways to support the organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, or the Catholic Relief Services, which are in the lead on child survival and development issues. You can, for example, make cash contributions, buy greeting cards, or volunteer time. And you can write to government officials insisting on their full support in issues related to children.

Resources for the improvement of health are being multiplied by unleashing the tremendous but greatly underutilized potential of popular and political will at national and international levels. Motivated by the need to provide a better future for our own as well as coming generations, people are joining together in powerful networks and social movements.

A different world - a world responsive and responsible to the expectations of common people - is being built. I invite you to join in the revolution that will help build that world.