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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
130th Session of the Executive Board
of the
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

"From Survival to Development:
Ensuring Education and Learning for All"

Paris, France
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"From Survival to Development:
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Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished members of the Executive Board,
Mr. Director-General,
colleagues of the United Nations system:

It is an honour for me to be here to address you today on UNICEF's priorities and on the encouraging prospects for vigorous Unesco-UNICEF cooperation in the years ahead. It is also a great pleasure to be here - a pleasure because I come not only as the executive head of another United Nations agency, but as the spokesman of a partner with Unesco, committed, like you, to the challenge of ensuring education and learning for all in the shortest possible time.

A time of opportunity

We find ourselves at a particularly exciting time of opportunity.

First - there is a new and growing capacity to empower persons everywhere with the knowledge to protect and provide for their families, and in particular, to care for and nurture their children:

- never before in history has there been so much relevant knowledge available - for example, the knowledge of simple techniques of vaccination and oral rehydration therapy, which is being used to save millions of young lives every year;

What are the elements of this time of opportunity to which I have referred?

Lessons from Child Survival and Development

I said a moment ago that we had the capacity, the channels of communication, and the unique opportunity to empower people with knowledge to save lives and to change lives.

We already have a most dramatic illustration of this, in what has happened in the health field in the 1980s through the Child Survival and Development Revolution.

Three months ago, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of the World Health Organisation, speaking at the 13th World Conference on Health Education in Houston, Texas, dramatised both the need and the opportunity when he said:

"Parents and families, properly supported, could save two-thirds of the 14 million children who die every year - if only they were properly informed and motivated."

We could be saving 27,000 children a day - the equivalent of 80 jumbo jets full of children - every day.

We already have the know-how and the technology to provide this support, and we see that, with effective action, and using available channels of communication and motivation, children's lives are being saved. Based on UNICEF's grass-roots experience, we know that in the last twelve months alone, 2.5 million children - 7,000 a day - have not died who would have died in 1980; and we face the prospect of saving lives at an even more accelerated rate. Our goal is 14,000 child lives saved every day by 1990, and 20,000 by the year 2000. It is noteworthy that experience has also shown that education - child survival and development knowledge - has concurrently given parents the confidence to lower fertility rates.

Parents embarked on what UNICEF calls "the knowledge road to health" can ensure the survival and growth of the most vulnerable children by applying today's knowledge about such basic health actions as immunisation, oral rehydration therapy, birth-spacing, breast-feeding, safe weaning, growth monitoring, control of respiratory infections, safe motherhood and basic hygiene.

The communications revolution of the last twenty years - the explosion in knowledge, in social organisations and channels for transmitting this knowledge - has been a major factor in the progress made in Child Survival in the 1980s. A combination of modern communications and social mobilisation enables the developing world to communicate with the majority of its families through the print and electronic mass media, as well as through community organisations.

But before I expand on the basic issues that UNICEF considers to be at the heart of essential education and learning for all, let me emphasise again why I believe that we do have a real opportunity to make a difference in education in the decade to come.

The human dimensions of development

I mentioned a Grand Alliance for Children. There is a new and exciting phenomenon in the world - a deepening political focus on children, and on the human dimensions of development.

For example, the joint communiqué issued by U.S. President Reagan and USSR General-Secretary Gorbachev after their Summit meeting in Moscow - in its only reference to Third World development - called for accelerated worldwide action to reduce childhood deaths from readily preventable causes.

The OAU in 1987 devoted, for the first time, major attention to children's issues, and, this summer, during its 25th anniversary Summit meeting with 31 heads of state and government participating, produced several major resolutions on the opportunities for addressing children's problems.

The 1986 Summit of the seven nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) pioneered the use of Summit meetings to highlight the priority of issues related to children. The seven heads of state or government subscribed to a number of key goals for Child Survival and Development, including universal primary education before the year 2000. They also called for early completion and adoption of the "Convention on the Rights of the Child".

There is growing support for the timely adoption by the United Nations of this Convention. UNICEF is most hopeful that such action be accomplished by, and in commemoration of, next year's 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Child (IYC). Passage of the Convention by the United Nations General Assembly during the fall of 1989 would represent an opportunity to establish not only the rights to which all children are entitled, but also the responsibilities of governments to protect those rights. This is the first time that child rights have been brought together in one Convention which, once accepted, will have the force of a binding obligation on all nations which accept it.

Among the 35 Articles of the Convention, Articles 15 and 16 place particular stress on children's rights to education, and encourage international cooperation particularly to eliminate illiteracy and ignorance worldwide, and to facilitate access to scientific and technical knowledge of modern teaching methods.

Also emphasised is the central role of education in developing the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, and in preparing that child to respect the culture, values and rights of others and to live a responsible life.

"Modest investments in education, wisely and steadily made, pay great dividends in fostering growth and reducing poverty...Countries which undertake to reform and upgrade their education systems will find the Bank a supportive partner".

The 4th Development Decade

As you know, discussions are well underway to define what will be the essential elements of the 4th Development Decade. I strongly believe that the international community can be convinced to place human and social development priorities at the centre of strategies for the Decade. Increasingly, we recognise that it is pointless to identify economic strategies without defining the human resource development that needs to parallel such strategies.

The fact that the Decade will be launched with International Literacy Year, is, I believe, symbolic of this human focus that must be the foundation of the 4th Development Decade.

Ensuring Education and Literacy for All

Unesco and UNICEF: a congruence of interests

I return to my initial expression of excitement about the opportunities to promote basic education and literacy for all, and about UNICEF's closer and closer collaboration with Unesco.

When I look at your Third Medium Term Plan, the concentration and sense of focus is very evident in the seven Major Programme Areas. I am particularly drawn to two of these: Major Programme Area I: Education and the future; and Area IV: Communications in the Service of Humanity.

When I see in Area I the "absolute priority of literacy and basic education", the emphasis on early childhood education and care, on parent education (particularly for better nutrition and health), and on education for children belonging to disadvantaged rural and urban populations, I know that we are on the same wavelength.

In your Area IV, I am struck by the congruence with UNICEF's own priorities to establish communications networks, involve the media, and adapt new communications technologies for development. We are on common ground, and indeed are already working together in a number of places, such as in El Salvador with the Catholic Church on Literacy by Radio - an imaginative initiative in distance learning, reaching out to poor rural women.

Education and learning for all - the basic issues

Mr. Chairman, we come back to the basic questions: How do we ensure that all children can go to school, or that opportunities can be created for those who missed out, to gain essential literacy, numeracy and life skills and knowledge?

Goals for the Year 2000

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Executive Board: as you know, Unesco, the World Bank and UNICEF are joining hands to organise a World Conference to focus on, and generate a renewed global commitment to, ensuring essential education and learning for all in the decades to come. The conference will take place in early 1990.

Both before and during that Conference, there will be a great deal of discussion around the world on the basic elements of education, of schooling and learning, and on the priority to be accorded to each of those elements. We will need to examine what the words "For All" mean. What constitutes universal primary education or universal literacy? What target groups get priority? What can we achieve by the Year 2000?

The creation of a "literate environment" is of prime importance. Literacy is a fundamental human right - it confers human dignity and self-respect. Like you, and like our colleagues in the World Bank, we believe that the most cost-effective way to achieve universal literacy and the other educational basics is through universal elementary or primary education of quality, so that every child leaves school literate, numerate and prepared to face the outside world.

However, we also have to find informal or non-formal means to educate those who have had to leave school early, or who have never been to school. The key question will be: can we find low-cost and cost-effective ways to do this? Can we mobilise entire societies to do this? Can we mobilise new resources - financial, human, or material - to do this?

Tanzania: will, imagination, communications

Tanzania showed that this can be done, when, in the 1970s, it managed to quadruple the number of 6 to 11 year-olds in its primary schools, and over the same decade it brought its illiteracy rate down by more than 10 percent a year - the steepest sustained fall in illiteracy ever achieved by any nation.

What made this possible was, first of all, the political commitment of the nation's leadership. But also, it was Tanzania's ingenuity in finding low-cost solutions, and its success in mobilising all possible resources, that made this education revolution possible without a great increase in the budget for education.

It was financially impossible to double the number of school buildings or hire and train thousands more teachers. But it was possible to double the capacity of existing schools by operating a shift system. It was possible to mobilise retired teachers and secondary and university students, as assistant teachers. Above all, it was possible to reach tens of thousands of men and women through distance training programmes - correspondence and radio courses.

For both adults and children, the literacy revolution in Tanzania has not been without its problems. But we must recognise that a revolution in education was brought about at a relatively low cost, in a relatively short time - given political will, imagination and modern communications technology.

And just as we have learned that the health revolution will succeed only if the health sector can mobilise the rest of society, so education goals can be established and achieved only if educators will recruit allies - at community level, nationally and internationally - as partners to ensure education and learning for all.

We need such alliances to plan and develop a decentralised, participatory education system - a process which your medium-term plan calls "democratisation of education".

The challenge ahead

Mr. Chairman, we know the challenge that lies ahead.

In 1982, Unesco and UNICEF signed our most recent cooperative agreement. May I suggest that with the new vigour recently injected into our relationship - with the common desire for concentrated and concerted action together - the time is now ripe to look again at that agreement, and to come to a new accord which accurately reflects the vigour and enthusiasm of the present sense of shared purpose. UNICEF looks forward to the achievement of such an accord.

We in this room have an unprecedented challenge: to dare to create a revolution in basic education for all in the decade ahead.

The World Conference offers us an incredible opportunity to galvanise global political will and to mobilise world resources for an education revival.

In the age of the communications satellite, and of the five-dollar radio ... in a year that has seen a tremendous surge in the international standing of the United Nations ... in a year that has seen unprecedented progress towards world peace and cooperation - is it not unconscionable that hundreds of millions of children have no access to school, and hundreds of millions of adults are illiterate?

It is a "moral outrage", as Barber Conable said in Berlin, to allow every fifth human being on our planet to subsist below even minimally acceptable standards of living.

I am sure that Mr. Conable would join with me in saying that it is a comparable moral outrage that even larger numbers are deprived of the basic knowledge required for them to function effectively in life.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Executive Board:

- never before have we had such relevant knowledge;
- never before have we had such a range of communications channels;
- never before have we had such an opportunity to achieve so much so quickly, at such a low financial and political cost - and when peace is breaking out around the world.

Let us join together to ensure that essential education and learning for all becomes a reality for all, before the end of this millenium.