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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
for
"Living City"

January 1989



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What would I, personally, like to see happen in the world in this coming new year? We enter the year with a sad reality to face: that still, today, and every day, 40,000 young children die, the vast majority of them from causes for which we have long since discovered low-cost cures and preventions.

There are a number of things I would like to see happen in relation to this grim statistic on a very concrete level. First, I would like to see us virtually achieve the United Nations goal of universal child immunization by 1990. We actually have until the end of 1990 to immunize 85 per cent of the world's children against the six main child-killing diseases, and still meet the mark, but - given the fact that some 4 million children die annually from immunizable diseases - I would like to see this monumental task basically accomplished by the end of 1989.

At first glance this may appear an unrealistically ambitious goal, but considering the fact that a decade ago only 5 per cent of the world's children had received the 50 cents worth of vaccine necessary to protect them from these scourges, and today immunization protects more than 60 per cent - well, we have learned enough and gathered enough momentum to bring the goal clearly within reach. Within the past year the lives of 1.5 million children have been saved as a result of progress made on this one measure alone. We will achieve the goal of universal immunization, however, if - and only if - people the world over become aware of what is involved, participate, and make it happen.

In 1989 I anticipate seeing similar progress for children on other low-cost/high-impact health techniques. For example, 10,000 young children still die each day from dehydration caused by diarrhoea even though a cure was discovered 20 years ago that costs about 10 cents per treatment, and can be applied by families themselves. It is called oral rehydration therapy (ORT) and it has been responsible for saving the lives of one million children in the past 12 months. It could be saving double that amount by the end of 1989 if we gather the forces to spread the word and the know-how.

We need also in 1989 to spread self-health practices like breastfeeding, used with proper weaning practices; monitoring children's growth to warn of impending malnutrition; family spacing; food supplementation; and female literacy.

Application of these simple, inexpensive measures could have such a dramatic effect in saving the lives and improving the health of young children that, together, they have come to be known as the potential for a "Child Survival and Development Revolution" (CSDR). In fact, many health experts, including those at UNICEF, are convinced that of this available health knowledge and technology - if fully applied - could, by the end of 1990, reduce child death rates of 1980 by half while contributing to the slowing of population growth rates in the process.

Another potential milestone for children that will be up for action in 1989 is the hopeful adoption of the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations during the fall session of the General Assembly. The Convention addresses the responsibilities of societies and parents to assure such rights of children as the rights: to survive; to be protected from abuse; and to develop physically and mentally. Adoption by the U.N. and eventual ratification by individual countries of the Convention will establish an important global standard on behalf of children. Unfortunately, passage will not occur automatically - it will require people in every country to become aware of the issues involved and to insist that their governments adopt and ratify the Convention. If they do, 1989 will produce a fitting commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Child!

There is something else that I would like to see happen in 1989 - something less tangible than meeting child health goals, but inextricably related. We are witnessing a "new ethos" emerge with regard to children, and before we enter the 1990s, I would like to see vastly more people the world over act out of a new sense of responsibility for the well-being of children.

We should not really be surprised that a new ethic is developing. In any civilization, morality must march with capacity. If 40,000 children were dying each day from causes which we could do little or nothing about, the situation would be tragic, indeed. But for this many children to die when cures and preventions exist which are so low-cost and so readily available is not only tragic, it is obscene. 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.

The fact that this is beginning to happen can be seen in the successes of the CSDR. Literally millions of people from all parts of the globe were involved in saving the 2.5 million young child lives spared in the past year through CSDR activities - from farmers and women's groups to religious leaders and groups (including the Focolare Movement) and hundreds of non-governmental organizations such as Rotary International, the Jaycees, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and Save the Children - to name just a few. Even government officials and heads of

states have joined this peaceful "revolution" to the extent that, for the first time, children's issues have been on the agenda at several summit meetings over the past two years, including summits in South Asia, Central America, Africa (when 31 heads of state - the largest number in history, for Africa - gathered this past summer) and the summit in Moscow in May between the two superpowers.

It is time for us to make a bigger leap in this, however. It is now time for morality to catch up with capacity, for a sea-change in public and political views, a change to redraw the line of what is acceptable in our times, a change which will demand that today's knowledge be put at the service of all humankind - a change which will make it unconscionable not to do what can now be done. That is what I would like to see happen; I would like to see this shift fully accomplished in 1989 - for the children - and the future - of our world.