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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the opening of the
Third Pan-African Symposium
Artists and Intellectuals for African Children

Bamako, Mali
6 March 1989

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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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Third Pan-African Symposium
ARTISTS AND INTELLECTUALS FOR AFRICAN CHILDREN

Bamako - 6 March 1989

I am delighted to join in welcoming you to the Third Pan-African Symposium of Artists and Intellectuals for African Children which has been so beautifully opened by His Excellency President Troaré.

This creative gathering meets under circumstances which are joyful for their possibilities and potential, but unfortunately grim in the conditions which have called us together. Today in Africa some 10,000 children died and a nearly comparable number were crippled for life. Some of these deaths are the tragic result of conflict - whether in the Sudan or in Southern Africa - and children are the principal victims. Unfortunately, I am compelled to leave Mali earlier than planned to co-chair with the Prime Minister of the Sudan, on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, an emergency meeting to prevent a repetition of last summer's tragedy when more than 200,000 people died in South and Central Sudan after the rains came in mid-May and blocked all forms of transportation. Such terrible events properly capture the news headlines. However, the great majority - 9 out of 10 - who die in Africa, die because of a silent emergency which is the result of a combination of gross poverty and underdevelopment. This is the subject of our meeting in Bamako.

When we search for the means to prevent this tragic toll, our first thoughts usually turn to doctors and hospitals and curative measures. We truly wonder what we can do to prevent this tragedy, whose solutions seem to be so dependent on doctors and hospitals - which we are not!

Our deeper search for ways to help will be rewarded. The reason was beautifully articulated last summer by Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, who, as Director-General of the World Health Organization, is perhaps the world's most authoritative voice from within the medical profession itself. He stated:

"We must recognize that most of the world's major health problems and premature deaths are preventable through changes in human behaviour and at low cost. We have the know-how and technology but they have to be transformed into effective action at the community level. 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. Immunization alone could save 3 million lives - and another 3 million deaths a year could be prevented by oral rehydration, a simple and cheap technology."

What does Dr. Nakajima mean by this? What are the implications of the fact that the keys to saving lives and improving the well-being of children lie in empowering people with knowledge and supporting them in making the behaviour changes necessary to apply it?

If the keys are conveying knowledge and supporting behaviour change, it is you here who are far more important to saving the lives and improving the well-being of children than the doctors and the formal medical community. Could it be that each of you artists and intellectuals here can be more important for the health of children than 5 or even 50 or 100 doctors?

Of course, in order to truly empower people with knowledge, we need a medical system too, even if that system would be virtually ineffective without the knowledge-for-the-people component. Thus, for example, we need an immunization system with a cold chain. We need a health centre for that one mother in ten who, even after following safe motherhood practices, needs special medical attention. There is a wholeness to empowering people with knowledge and also ensuring that the health system is ready to provide the appropriate back-up support. In fact, the formal health system can be a vital community link in the process of empowering people with knowledge.

Unfortunately, health systems are difficult to maintain and expand at this time of economic haemorrhaging in Africa - at a time when economic crisis and adjustment demands have contributed to dramatic reductions in health expenditures by governments. We in UNICEF have estimated that more than 1,000 young children are dying each day in Africa as a consequence of economic recession and the debt burden.

It is for this reason that the Bamako Initiative is so important for Africa today. Conceived in September 1987 by the Ministers of Health of Africa under the chairmanship of our distinguished host, President Traoré of Mali, and with the inspired support and contribution of WHO Regional Bureau Director Dr. Monekosso, the Bamako Initiative outlines a do-able plan to make a basic health-support system available to all women and children in Africa.

The measures called for in the Bamako Initiative range from issues of community participation to major international support. Perhaps the main genius of the plan is that each measure is readily feasible - there are no impossibly difficult missing elements. Like pieces of a puzzle scattered on a table, the Bamako Initiative is ready to assemble into a coherent whole - a system, or method, of maternal and child health care which is adaptable throughout Africa.

The approach is based on a model of local and district management of health services supported by a reliable imported supply of low-cost essential drugs that are appropriate to a region's needs. Charges for services which include the provision of essential drugs are considerably less expensive than current commercial prices for those drugs alone. Resources taken in in this way have proven to be sufficient to finance not only replenishment of the drugs and other basic supplies, but some other elements of care, as well. Of course once a centre is staffed and operating, it is used for a wide range of maternal and child health services.

The international community would participate by providing initial resources for the drugs and supplies, and particularly the initial foreign exchange currency to establish the system. A main component of this external assistance involves continuing support and training to upgrade skills in primary health care management. The system would, of course, eventually become self-sustaining during the 1990s. What makes the proposal alluring to the international donor community is that it has solid potential to make a tremendous impact on the health of Africans in proportion to the amount of external assistance required. What makes it important for Africans is that it has the potential to not only attract US\$1 billion in foreign aid by the turn of the century to Africa's health system, but also to enable a number of African nations to truly take charge of local health needs, even in these times of economic hardship.

The Bamako Initiative has gained powerful momentum in the 18 months since it was first articulated in this very room.

In fact, the purpose of my current journey on this continent is to see how the first attempts at this approach are faring. I have already visited Nigeria, Benin and Ghana.

With this overview approach in mind, the central theme expressed in the remarks of Dr. Nakajima, which I cited a moment ago, finds a very fertile context for application. Many artists and intellectuals - in fact many of you in this room - have already seized the challenge. You have begun to use your expertise at communication to contribute to empowering people with health knowledge. The wave of the future - social mobilization for child survival and development - has gained remarkable momentum from among your legions.

- I well remember the role of Yousson Ndour of Senegal in the 1986 drive to save Senegalese children from deaths due to immunizable diseases. He was a driving force in an accelerated programme responsible for increasing the percentage of Senegalese children immunized against the main child-killing diseases from 45 per cent in 1985 to almost 70 per cent by 1987.
- Cameroonian performer Manu Dibango, who is also a member of the Pan African Committee, has been the key figure behind establishing a National Association of Artists and Intellectuals for Children in his homeland.
- In Cape Verde an album of ten popular folk songs entitled "from Mindelo and its Children to UNICEF" was produced by the best-known Cape Verdean artists with the involvement of local authorities and bussinesspeople.

- In Guinea Bissau graphic artists co-operated to produce notices and comic strips on: immunization, how to prepare drinking water, and environmental hygiene.
- Mozambican painter Malangatana sets an example for solidarity among African artists. Right here in Bamako he is constructing a mural which will be inaugurated at the end of this symposium.
- In our host country, Mali, Mr. Cheick Oumar Sissoko has made a film "Garbage Boy" which depicts the daily struggle of a child who migrated to the capital in order to survive - a reality unfortunately shared by millions of children throughout the continent.
- In Chad the National Press Committee for childhood, consisting of Radio-Chad, the Infochad daily and the Al-Watan monthly, work closely with UNICEF in efforts such as combatting the low literacy rate of the population. And nutrition, needs in basic health, juvenile delinquency, hygiene, and the education of women are among the themes covered in a weekly show produced by Radio-Chad entitled, "Carnets de L'Enfance", which is broadcast in French, Arabic and Sara, a local language.
- In Somalia the Waaberi group staged a three-hour musical play entitled "Cilmi Iyo Caado", meaning "Tradition and Science", which deals with child protection. The play mixes traditional practice and modern scientific methods with such appeal that an estimated 70,000 people have already seen the play, and requests have been received to show the play in at least four neighboring countries.
- In Lesotho the National University's traveling theater has been performing plays in the villages on the subjects of immunization and rural development.
- In Malawi a graphic production workshop produced posters to be utilized to spread information on the Expanded Programme of Immunization.

The list could go on and on, and the possibilities are literally endless. In all of these efforts, artists and intellectuals have two main roles. First is your role as communicators. Within your songs, in the films you make, from your pulpits, in your plays, books, articles, scripts, lectures, sculptures and paintings - pointed health and behaviour messages can be delivered in a manner that gets across to people most effectively. You are the voices that people on this continent listen to.

Second, artists and intellectuals set standards and values. When you and your colleagues met in Harare last year to focus attention on the tragedy of children in the front line states, you made a priceless contribution to their cause by focusing global and African opinion on the unconscionability of what was happening.

Furthermore, on your continent, it is you to whom people look as role models. If you breastfeed your children; insist on using the simple home remedy of oral rehydration therapy instead of expensive hospital-administered intravenous cures when the need arises for children dying of dehydration due

to diarrhoeal diseases; if you have your children immunized - people will notice, and they will emulate you. Are you willing to use your personal status to improve the well-being of African children? Can you persuade other artists and intellectuals to do so also?

In our midst today, we have some of the most powerful social mobilizers - traditional communicators. Your daily contacts with members of your communities constitute an ideal forum for spreading vital information on the health and well-being of families, especially children.

Sports personalities have a role in this too. It started in Sri Lanka, where, during a major cricket match including the now-famous Imran Khan, soon to become the newest UNICEF Special Representative for Sports, the queen field was first used to splash eight-foot high letters across the sidelines - and in front of the cameras - reading "Immunize your child" in three languages.

In Mali, a famous soccer player, Mr. Salif Keita, also known as "Domingo", is an active member of the Committee of Artists and Intellectuals.

And weren't we all charmed by soccer's super-star Pele, who made such a monumental contribution in Brazil with a 15-second television spot. His tiny mother stood next to him with her arm around him saying to the camera: "Of course he was a breastfed baby!"

Sudanese Olympic Gold Medal runner Omar Khalifa, who volunteered to spearhead the "Sport Aid" in 1986, has given us a truly inspiring example. Lighting the torch of peace in a Sudan refuge camp and leading its celebrated relay journey across Europe and to the United Nations in New York, he became the symbol of the greatest mass event in history, now in the Guinness Book of World Records, with its 20 million participants mobilizing support for the United Nations Special Session on African Recovery and Development.

In the role of setting values regarding children, artists and intellectuals have a new extremely important tool in the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention, which hopefully will be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly this fall and then ratified into law by the necessary minimum of 20 individual countries in the immediate aftermath, will set a global standard regarding the responsibilities of adults - and their countries - toward children.

The Convention is an example of a phenomenal contribution by intellectuals toward designing a new ethos for children, and Africans have played no small part in its advance. In November, for example, a West African seminar on the Convention attended by delegates and observers from 15 countries, produced a consensus Dakar Declaration supporting adoption and early ratification of the convention. It also called on African states to create legal instruments to better address specific needs of the African child. Similar activities are increasingly taking place at the regional and national levels. Furthermore, the OAU 25th anniversary Summit - chaired by President Traoré - last summer made a significant impact on the movement of this issue with its resolution urging the 1989 adoption of the Convention at the U.N. General Assembly.

It is worth noting that the OAU Summit also advanced a potential landmark for African children by agreeing to review at their 1989 session, the prospect of declaring the 1990s as the "Decade of the African Child". I appeal to African Heads of States, to you, President Traoré, as Chairman of the OAU, and to others with influence such as Mwalimu Nyerere, to support the proposed declaration of the Decade of the African Child as well as the possibility of convening a World Summit for children - an idea which is already gathering momentum worldwide.

My creative colleagues in this hopeful struggle, our challenge is two-fold.

First, how do we get the necessary messages into people's lives? How do we help make possible the communication to people so that they are, in fact, empowered with all of this readily available life-saving health knowledge? For example, how do we persuade people to avail themselves of immunization facilities which are already in place?

And second, how do we collectively, after demonstrating that people can be empowered with knowledge, create the moral climate that makes in unconscionable for governments and communities to not incorporate the health systems required to foster and support basic health knowledge and low-cost, life-saving technology?

Incredible resources of talent have gathered in Bamako for these three days. Your collective presence in this room is, in itself, potentially a major resource for the children of this noble continent. I therefore urge all Governments to support the efforts of artists and intellectuals for children everywhere. Let us take full-advantage of this kinetic force and, before we disperse this historic gathering, seize the challenge of these issues at a whole new level - for the children - and the future - of Africa.