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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
World Round Table on Children

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Paris, France
29 March 1989

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"The Issue is less What, than Whether"

We come to this extraordinary Round Table from every corner of the globe - from four continents and 22 countries. We come from the palaces of presidents, from the statehouses of parliaments, and the conference tables of national administrations. We come from the quiet rooms of academia, the news rooms of media, and the living rooms of family life. We come from many responsibilities, many experiences, and many perspectives. But we come with one purpose, one cause. We come for children.

We come to ask what can now be done to craft a different, better life for all the world's children ... to ask what can be done to preserve the basic standards which have so far been achieved for many hundreds of millions of children ... and what can be done to extend those standards to the hundreds millions more yet unreached.

After two centuries of progress for children in France, our gracious host country, and after four decades of unprecedented progress for the world's children, what lies ahead to the year 2000 and into the next millenium?

Are we now on the threshold of attaining what once seemed only a dream - of assuring the survival and healthy development of every child on the planet? Or, in the face of mounting economic problems, are we perched on an abyss, with a whole new generation of children at risk of falling in?

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We have come to the City of Light - in this bicentennial of one of the greatest lights, the Rights of Man - to try to answer the question of what can now be done for the world's children. There are many fields such as drugs and street children and child abuse for which we are still largely looking for the answers of what to do - and we must push forward in this search. But that question of what to do is already largely answered in many fields.

It is answered in the scores of countries such as Pakistan and India now moving steadily toward protecting all their children from vaccine preventable diseases. It is answered in countries such as Egypt and Nicaragua, which teach parents how to save their children from the fatal dehydration of diarrhoea. It is answered by those organizations now acting to eradicate the guinea worm that debilitates whole villages. It is answered by those who drill wells and by those who maintain them; by those who teach sanitation, and by those who wash their hands. It is answered in the offices of those who now plan a world conference on basic education, and in the conference chambers of those who have drafted a charter of the rights of every child.

At least in regard to the most fundamental of all issues - that of children's survival - the question of what can be done is largely answered in the experience of all those assembled in this room. It is answered in what we have done, and what we have witnessed. It is answered in what we know, and what we share.

Many of the answers are so readily apparent, that the question of what can be done becomes effectively mute.

And because the question of "what" has been answered in so many sectors, a different question remains. The question is less what than whether...and when.

And it is the answer to the question of "whether" which shall determine which course the world of children will take in the next decade: toward even worse of the times which now end the lives of so many millions of children, debilitate so many millions more, and drive hope and promise from hundreds of millions? Or toward the possibilities which are within our reach today? ...toward the best of times - toward survival, health, growth and development for all children?

The most urgent, long overdue question is not what, but whether.

None in this room are unfamiliar with the present plight of so many of the world's children. And none are unaware that, for tens of millions, that plight grows worse. Economic crisis, including recession and external debt, have so haemorrhaged Latin America and Africa, in particular, that average incomes have fallen by 10 to 25 per cent in the 1980s. In the poorest nations, spending per head on health has been reduced by 50 per cent. And it is always the most vulnerable - among nations, and within nations - which bear the greatest portion of the burden. Especially children and mothers.

But those of us who have gathered here in Paris are here because we are

also aware that activities are afoot throughout the world which make these potentially the best of times for children, as well.

— We are aware of the historically unprecendented progress being made for the survival and health of children - often at low financial cost - to which I alluded earlier, and which is chronicled in detail in UNICEF's annual State of the World's Children report. The lives of some 7,000 children are already being saved each day as a result of recent initiatives, and this could be doubled within two years if only the will is there to do it.

— We are aware of the steadily rising consciousness and attention to children being marshalled throughout the world - by leaders of nations, by parliamentarians and bureaucrats, by volunteer organizations and professional associations, by business, by religious groups and structures, and by the media.

— And we are aware that that consciousness has shepherded a piece of paper through ten years of difficult, tense negotiations, and that that piece of paper - a draft Convention on the Rights of the Child - which ten years ago seemed like nothing more than a utopian fantasy, now knocks at the door of the United Nations General Assembly.

— And perhaps embracing all of these positive actions for children, we are aware that a new and different climate is spreading in the world - a climate of resolution of conflict ... of lessening of tensions ... of collaboration ... of reliance upon international mechanisms. Such a climate bodes well not only for the long-term survival of children in a more peaceful world, but of a far more positive potential for realizing present possibilities for reducing disease, improving nutrition, extending knowledge, and expanding opportunities.

The true challenge for us, and for all who are committed to improving the lives of children, is how to sustain this accelerated progress ... how to extend this leadership consciousness ... how to translate that paper into law ... and how to "exploit" the present improving world situation - both for the benefit of children, and so that collaboration for children contributes to further improving the world situation for everyone. If we cannot answer the question of how to do what is already readily doable, how can we hope to devise an effective answer to those issues such as drugs and street children for which we do not yet have an effective low-cost strategy.

We are all too well aware that, despite the rightness of our mission, enlightened action on behalf of children is still usually the exception rather than the norm. Even as our Grand Alliance for Children has grown in numbers, we still constitute only an enlightened minority.

Yet, so many of the great social reforms of history have been initiated by enlightened minorities: the French Revolution and the Rights of Man, the abolition of slavery, the suffrage of women, the struggle against colonialism,

and the environmental movement are among them. Each of these began with only a few who understood their rightness - not only for the immediate cause, but for the long-term good of all humanity. But small bands of visionary individuals who are capable of stating their case clearly and convincingly, and who manage to seize just the right moment - the window of opportunity - to capture the public's attention and commitment, can carry their cause forward to success. And each cause thus grew in strength; each small band grew in numbers.

To succeed in the decade ahead, we will need to be more resourceful, more inventive, more committed and more effective than ever before. And, as the past is our guide, we know that we can expect daunting challenges and discouraging setbacks as well as welcomed opportunities.

Today and tomorrow, we will hear from each other on the challenges which have been met in many countries. We'll hear of accomplishment, and of short-comings. We'll hear of techniques that have worked, and those that haven't. Each of these experiences offers lessons for all of us on how to move ahead as we enter the next decade. Our challenge, here in Paris, is to synthesize these lessons, and draw from them the inspiration - and the foundation - for bold new strategies for achieving the goals which are set before us.

Those goals are ambitious. You have them before you in the paper on Strategies for Children in the 1990s. They include the quantifiable health goals set forth by the international Task Force on Child Survival in Talloires, France, and by the WHO-UNICEF Joint Committee on Health Policy (whose goals for attainment by the year 2000 are being distributed with the text of my statement). They include the legislative goal of adoption and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child - and enactment of corresponding legislation within each country to ensure compliance with the Convention.

These goals are ambitious, but they are not unrealistic. They are plausible globally because we in this room, and others, have demonstrated, in so many countries, under widely varying and often formidably difficult circumstances, that programmes for empowering parents and families and communities to protect and nurture children can be launched ... can be extended to even the most remote homes ... and can be institutionally sustained.

But how do we translate "possible" into reality? How do we convert our hopes and ambitions into accomplishment? How do we secure this different, better life for all children? This should be a major topic for this Round Table.

I believe that we will all agree that the first task is to help people - people who are leaders, and people who are citizens - to appreciate just how possible the possibilities are. And I believe that, when people know what can be done, they act.

I base my case on our experience of the past decades since the end of World War II. We have seen a dramatic change in global morality. Today, our world no longer allows millions of people to suffer in the great disasters which capture the media headlines. Whether in Kampuchea in the late 1970s, in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa in the mid-1980s, in Armenia four months ago, or in the Sudan today - when world opinion recognizes that people are in obvious need, the world responds. Indeed, UNICEF itself was created because children were seen to be in need, in the devastated countries of Europe immediately after the war, and the world in 1946 said: "We must help".

It is perhaps difficult to believe that only three years earlier, - in 1943, - as the Bengal famine progressed, the British Government felt absolutely no responsibility to release food from the amply stocked food stores to the families dying alongside them. One century before, in the Irish famine, the British Government likewise felt no responsibility to take care of the hundreds of thousands of Irish starving from the potato blight by feeding them from the bumper corn harvest brought by the same moist weather.

We've seen quite a change from that past of non-responsibility which allowed governments to ignore mass devastation and suffering.

I would propose to you that this new ethic of action in response to emergencies is premised on two factors: one, that people can see and recognize a tragedy in which other people are suffering; and second, that people see that something can be done about it and insist on remedial action by their society.

It is, I'm sure, no coincidence that this new ethic of global concern emerged just as world communications truly came of age. With the now rare exception of tragedies in areas so remote or isolated that they are not covered by the media, as in Southern Sudan last year, we no longer learn of a flood or typhoon that occurred two months ago; our morning news tells us of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that occurred during the night. We no longer hear of droughts or famines last year; we see pictures and films of people starving today. We no longer are told only of people who are already dead; we discover that there are people in danger - but still alive - right now.

And we respond, because we believe that the cheque we send to Save the Children or Médecins sans Frontières or UNICEF will make a difference. We know that food or medicine or clothing will soon be on its way. And we telegram our representative in parliament or write our newspaper editor to say that our Government ought to do more because we believe that a Hercules transport plane filled with food or medicine or blankets will make a difference. And we believe that our government ought to respond just as we are...because there are things that government can do that we can't do privately. And governments get that message. Even beyond explicit public demands that governments act, governments understand. When they see their constituents donating millions of dollars or buying charity music albums or whatever, governments understand that the public is implicitly saying "something ought to be done, and our government ought to be doing it, too".

The outpouring of public compassion in a tragedy tells governments that they have both an expectation and a license to act as well.

Just as this new ethic of response to "loud emergencies" has emerged because the world is aware of the emergencies and sees a course of action to respond, I would propose to you that a similar new ethic for the "silent emergency" - the tragedies of mass-scale poverty and deprivation which numb the backs of our minds but which rarely capture headlines - can also arise, and can be the path by which world society - governments as well as institutions, communities and individuals - fully accepts its responsibility for the health and well-being of all people.

When 20,000 people were buried in the rubble of Armenia in December, and the media almost instantaneously brought stories and pictures of the tragedy into hundreds of millions of homes, the world responded. But when 40,000 children die each day around the world from largely preventable causes, the world hardly notices. There are few headlines. It is almost never a lead story on the evening news. The world is aware of these deaths, but seemingly unmoved. These children die not from earthquakes or volcanoes or terrorist bombs or invasions, but from disease and malnutrition and lack of basic services ... essentially, from the consequences of poverty and gross underdevelopment ... from the lack of access to even rudimentary health facilities, basic literacy, or clean water - and from the failure of society to protect those children in spite of poverty and inability to help themselves. Indeed, last year, and again this year, at least a half million more children will die, because their governments have diverted still more resources from basic services in order to service debts.

And the urgency for action on child survival is underscored by its relation to the demographic explosion. We now know and see that when parents become confident that their first children will survive they have fewer children - and that those countries which have experienced a rapid drop in their child deaths to U5MR levels ["Under 5 Mortality Rates"] of 70 or less, the drop in the number of births has been even greater.

And so these children die from poverty, and they die from "other priorities". They die from neglect. They die because human society has abandoned them.

It is not that the world doesn't care. I think the world does. At least, most people do, or would. It is rather that those two factors that make possible the ethic of responding to the loud emergencies have not yet come into play on the silent emergency: real awareness of the scale of the silent emergency, and a sense that something can be readily done. The first is closer at hand than the second. After all, most of the world is aware of poverty and hunger and disease. Most of the world is aware that people - and especially children - are dying or growing up weak and stunted and maimed.

What is missing is the awareness that something can be done, readily, to change this fate. For I am convinced that when the world understands that a difference can be made to relieve suffering and reduce waste of human lives,

the world acts. People act; families act; communities act; nations act; the world acts.

In any civilization, morality must march with changing capacity. Those who can articulate the human conscience must now assert unequivocably that it is now just as unacceptable for so many millions of children to die in the silent emergency of needless malnutrition and infection as it is for them to die in the louder emergencies of drought or famine. Morality must be brought into step with our new capacity; the mass deaths of children must be placed alongside slavery, racism and apartheid on history's shelf reserved for those things which are simply no longer acceptable to humankind. We must begin to establish that the rights of children extend beyond birth. Children have a right to survive, to grow in health, and to be protected and nurtured in their growth to full potential.

One challenge for us, therefore, is how to help the world to understand. How do we capture attention? How do we share what we know? How do we enlist whole nations and whole societies in our cause? How do we persuade others, too, that it is unconscionable that so many children die so needlessly - more than 20,000 a day, the equivalent of an Armenian earthquake daily - from causes so readily preventable at low cost?

We have used "publicity" over the years, and it has served our cause well. Our State of the World's Children reports are probably the most widely reported and widely read United Nations publication. We have stated our case as clearly as we can, and, I think, convincingly. We have been represented by celebrities from the screen and stage and concert hall. Our cause has been embraced by many of the wisest leaders of nations in the world today, and championed by members of parliament and ministers and legions of others in government service.

These efforts have served well. They have moved us forward through the successes of the past decade, and pose us strongly at the threshhold of the next. But are they enough to carry us through? Are they enough to achieve our goals. What more can we do?

How do we prompt the world to cross the bridge from "can" to "will"? What is the key to the further breakthroughs we require?

Last year I spoke to a group of activist academics of the Pacific region. The theme of my speech was "Reaching the Unreached". I was speaking about the children and their parents whom we have not yet reached. The conference replied: "To reach the unreached, we must first reach the unreached leaders" - e.g., the majority of medical academies and medical professionals who have yet to accept and practice the concept of oral rehydration therapy - the low-cost cure for the single biggest killer of children in the world today.

Indeed, that premise has characterized much of our work in recent years. And we have been notably successful. We have begun to reach leaders at all levels of societies - from leaders of nations to leaders of street vendor associations. And they have made our cause their cause.

One particularly promising development of recent years has been the willingness of national leaders to take up the issues of children with other national leaders: to frankly examine the situations in their own countries, to exchange experiences and expertise, and to collaborate on common strategies that hold out the prospect of great benefits at low cost. This has been manifest in such fora as the past three annual Summit meetings of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); the past two Summits of the Organization for African Unity (OAU); the Summit of the League of Arab States; summit gatherings of the presidents of Central America; and the US-USSR Summit in Moscow last May.

These high-level considerations of the needs and opportunities for children have served not simply as publicity gimmicks, but as opportunities for nations to seriously commit themselves to concerted, concentrated action for children. Inclusion of children on the agendas of these summits have (1) required each government to begin to "get its own house in order" on programmes for children, so that it would not be seen as lacking among its peers; (2) generated the momentum for further accelerated interventions for children in each participating country; and (3) provided a continuing mechanism for "monitoring" delivery on the commitment which each government has made.

It is this very positive experience that prompted UNICEF to suggest that the moment might now be at hand to convene a World Summit for Children - a gathering of leaders of representative nations from throughout the world to address the challenge of converting promise into achievement ... of answering the question of "whether" with a determined "Yes".

A World Summit for Children would be an opportunity to take a giant step further at the highest level of leadership commitment and identification with the needs of children. The very fact of a "summit for children" is so out-of-the-norm and unusual that the leadership gathering alone would be of enormous consciousness-raising value. In addition to having the several impacts identified above with respect to the regional and bilateral summits, whether or not a World Summit produced a detailed plan of actions for children, it would create a far greater awareness of needs and opportunities than currently exists, and would thus, in much the same fashion as the International Year of the Child in 1979, create a positive, stimulative environment not only among governments, but also among non-governmental organizations, the business sector, media, etc., and the public at-large - an environment which could be exploited into widescale additional interventions for children.

And if a World Summit for Children, why not parallel summits for children at country and local community levels?

The idea of a World Summit for Children obviously seems compelling in its own right. But, as Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar observed in a public statement endorsing the State of the World's Children Report: "Children do not live and grow in a world unto themselves. They live in our world, and their survival and growth is dependent upon the health of our societies. ...The state of the world's children is linked to growth and development, just

as the well-being of children is essential for sustained economic and social progress." While the situation of children cannot be separated from the situation of the world at-large, three other precepts also relate to any consideration of the value of a Summit for Children. First, countries have demonstrated in the past several years that important progress can be made for children despite adverse economic and political circumstances - even despite war and the consumption of resources that total war demands. Therefore, protection of the lives and livelihood of children should not be dependent upon better times in general. Second, we have also demonstrated in the past several years that countries and communities are prepared to agree on actions for children even if they disagree on virtually everything else. Thus, even conflicting forces in El Salvador, Lebanon, Uganda, Afghanistan - and now, in the Sudan - have agreed to cooperate - or, at least, not interfere - for the benefit of the urgent needs of children. This gives rise to a third precept: the possibility that creating opportunities to agree and cooperate on children can contribute importantly to creating environments of agreement and cooperation on a broader range of difficult issues - whether the ideological/strategic issues that separate great powers; economic issues which separate North and South; or political issues that separate conflicting forces.

The question might be asked: "Why a Summit for Children instead of a Summit on the Debt Crisis, or on the Environment, or on Trade?" The answer is not "instead of", but why not a beginning of summit-level commitment to issues upon which world collaboration can make a difference? And if we are to begin, why not begin in a sector which is ripe for collaboration because it is ripe for success? And why not begin with those whose future is the fundamental concern of every government, because they are the future? Why not begin with children? Because children cannot wait.

1988 brought a new sense of possibilities to the world: possibilities of the lessening of global tensions; possibilities of resolution of regional conflicts; possibilities of reductions in armaments and the consequent savings of resources; possibilities of increased reliance on multilateral institutions; possibilities of serious global attention to the environment, to sustainable development, and to amelioration of the debt crisis. 1988 also brought a new sense of creativity and boldness in international leadership.

The whole decade of the 1980s brought new possibilities for improving the condition of children. Might not 1989 and the decade of the 1990s see the possibilities for children opening the door toward realizing the even greater possibilities for the world at-large?

The question, again, is not "what" but "whether".

The idea of such a World Summit is one plausible proposal for moving toward resolving the "whether" question. I know there will be other ideas which I hope this Round Table will examine as well in these three days.

This group which we have assembled is too bright, too creative, and too determined for it to fail to produce many wise and visionary ideas for moving us forward into the 1990s - not only on the problems for which we have no strategies as yet, but, most particularly, how do we make it as unconscionable

as slavery, racism and colonialism to not act on those readily preventable causes of child death, disability and malnutrition that each day take a toll greater than Armenia and each week a toll greater than Hiroshima? If we cannot succeed on these issues, how can we succeed on more difficult tasks that also must be addressed in the 1990s if we are to consider ours a civilized world?

The creativity and imagination and pragmatic determination which we apply to this challenge over these three days may well change the face of the world for children. It is a fitting task in this 200th year of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. It is a fitting means by which to set our course for the final decade of this millenium.