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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
Third Ordinary Session of the  
Organization of African Unity (OAU)  
Conference of African Ministers of Health

Kampala, Uganda  
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I extend warm greetings to all who have gathered for this OAU Conference of African Health Ministers.

I regret that my involvement in the southern Sudan emergency as the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations prevents my personal participation at this conference, but I rest assured knowing that Ms. Sally Fegan-Wyles will offer UNICEF's insights and concerns on my behalf during your deliberations. I have asked her to share with you this message.

This gathering meets in Kampala at a crucial moment for the children of your nations. Africa faces great hardship, and yet it is presented with prospects of promise. In these few moments today I will not elaborate on the hardships - we are all sorely aware of the developmental crises in economic and social arena, which grip this noble continent.

My message to you today will spring largely from one effect of those hardships. Today in Africa, as every day, 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. Most of these deaths, we are sadly aware, are attributable to causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures or preventions.

How can we bridge the vital gap between such readily available health knowledge and technology, and its actual use by those for whom it could make the life or death difference?

It is in response to this question that we find one venue of great hope for the children of Africa, and it is in response to this question that the Bamako Initiative is so important for Africa today. It has been less than two years since you - the Health Ministers of Africa - adopted this landmark plan to make a basic health-support system available to all women and children in Africa.

The past year has seen steady progress in the planning and implementation of this new international plan to make primary health care (PHC) universally accessible to mothers and children, with the assistance of UNICEF and WHO. Guinea, Benin and Sierra Leone are well underway on the first stages leading to eventual national implementation. Togo has established a detailed plan to begin work in 1990. Nigeria, Kenya and Mauritania are starting this year in selected geographical areas. Many other countries are well advanced in the planning and formulation of appropriate policies required for the Initiative to be successful. Perhaps most encouraging is the fact that communities in some countries have begun to accumulate funds for purchase of basic essential drugs, operational costs and small investments in improving health services at the local level.

Advances have been made in other aspects of the Bamako Initiative, as well. Compared with the early period following adoption, a far clearer idea of the issues and problems has emerged. This has come about not only as a result of planning and implementation, but also from the extensive dialogue which UNICEF and WHO have held with many international and bi-lateral development agencies, non-governmental organizations working in this field, and academic institutions and specialized consulting groups. The greatest effort has been given to design and articulate how the very poor can be adequately protected in a situation based on community financing.

Because of the scale of participation inherent in the plan - from the community to the international level - a key to the success of Bamako Initiative efforts at this stage lies in establishing inter-ministerial co-ordinating groups which would be capable of inviting multi-lateral, bi-lateral and non-governmental organizations to actively participate. This is one vital area for which Africa must look to you gathered in this room - the Health Ministers of Africa - for leadership and for setting an example in stimulating co-operation.

The task of mobilizing participation for efforts related to the Bamako Initiative received a tremendous boost this year from the Third Pan-African Symposium of Artists and Intellectuals, which was held in Bamako specifically to focus attention on the plan. Sponsored by the Pan-African Committee of Artists and Intellectuals, the Government of Mali and UNICEF, the Bamako Symposium was held in the context of a broad effort which has helped to involve African artists and intellectuals in supporting strategies for the survival, protection and development of the continent's children. This, in turn, is part of a still wider alliance with communicators at all levels, including parliamentarians, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, women's movements, religious leaders and sports personalities.

Such groups, including the African Artists and Intellectuals, have already proven strong allies in working toward goals set by the African Ministers of

Health. I refer most specifically to the goal you set for Universal Child Immunization (UCI) by 1990. Massive numbers of people and creative social mobilization have achieved such progress that 16 countries have reported coverage levels of 70 per cent or greater against all of the six main child-killing diseases. Another 10 countries have reached 60 percent levels and are likely to reach the 75 percent goal on target. Thirty countries have achieved at least 50 percent levels for all antigens.

Though this progress in the quest for universal immunization is historic in its scale, much more remains to be done and efforts must be accelerated still further if the target is to be met. The next two years will be critical to give credibility to goal setting and to set the basis for the next steps: eradicating polio by the year 2000, and, by the year 1995, eliminating neonatal tetanus, reducing the incidence of measles by 90 percent, and eliminating guinea worm. If we don't succeed on the relatively easy goal of UCI, how can we convince others of our seriousness on these more difficult goals for the future?

Another major step for the children of Africa - indeed, for all the world's children - is likely to be taken this year in the approval of the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations General Assembly. If this step is taken - and your continued support is still needed - the Convention will then need to be ratified by individual countries in order for it to become law.

Mr. Chairperson, I would like to say a brief word about a new initiative upon which UNICEF is embarking with UNDP, UNESCO, the World Bank, and, I hope many other national and international partners. We will jointly sponsor a World Conference on Education for All, to be hosted by the government of Thailand in early March 1990. A groundswell of renewed and vigorous international commitment to ensure basic education for all has given rise to this initiative. The emphasis is solidly on empowering the poor and most vulnerable with the skills and knowledge that they need to gain mastery over their lives and destinies. The focus and commitment represented by this conference is expected to give an enormous new impetus to basic education in the 1990s.

Each of your heads of government is receiving an invitation to lead a delegation to the conference, and I hope that you, as Ministers of Health, will be involved in this initiative, and in the Conference that we are calling the "Alma Ata for Education".

Finally, Mr. Chairperson, the OAU Heads of State Summit of May 1988 endorsed the proposal to consider at its Summit this year a resolution declaring the 1990s as Decade of the African Child. I urge you to support the proposal in the resolutions of this conference. Your expressed support for the proposed convening of a World Summit for Children, an idea which is already gathering momentum worldwide, will also have a major impact toward bringing issues related to children higher on the political agendas of your countries, and will contribute to a global raising-of-consciousness regarding the priority of the well-being of children.

Thank you.