
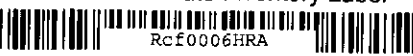


File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1989-0017

Address by Mr. James Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Conference on Health, Welfare and Environment:
Cooperation Among Italy and Countries of
Latin America and the Caribbean

"Protection of Childhood: A Guarantee for the Future"

Rome, Italy
3 May 1989

	UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label
	RCF0006HRA
Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02142	
ExR/Code: CF/EXD/SP/1989-0017	
Co-operation Among Italy & Latin America and the Caribbean	
Date Label Printed 18-Jan-2002	

cover + 5 pp + 06



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детскому фонду Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للأطفال

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Rome - 3 May 1989

"PROTECTION OF CHILDHOOD: A GUARANTEE FOR THE FUTURE"

Regional context for children: hope amidst hardship

We are all aware of the general constellation of influences affecting children of Latin America and the Caribbean.

First, a terrible economic situation in most countries impacts most heavily on the most vulnerable - especially children from poor families and their mothers.

In many countries, average incomes have fallen by 10 to 25 per cent during the 1980s. The region enters the 1990s as net exporters of capital. Although many billions in debt service were paid between 1980 and 1988, the regional external debt rose by more than US\$150 billion during the period. Levels of malnutrition, especially among children, and low birth weights increased.

In other words, it is children who are bearing the heaviest burden of debt and recession in the 1980s. And in tragic summary, it can be estimated that an average of more than 500 young children have died each day in Latin America in 1988 as a result of the slowing down or the reversal of progress resulting from the economic situation.

Second, the adverse impact of these circumstances can be substantially ameliorated by adjustment with a human face. By this we mean protecting the investment on the human side during the process of coping with Third World external debt. We mean ensuring that human needs are met in terms of basic health, education and so forth - and not, as is happening so often, making such vital concerns the objects of greatest neglect and of the heaviest cutbacks.

Adjustment with a human face also implies restructuring the social sectors to ensure that they are realistic and that more emphasis is placed on measures which can effect all people - such as, for example, in the health sector, focusing more on prevention of illness and on primary health care and less on expansion of curative services.

In Latin America, positive responses to "adjustment with a human face" initiatives by academics, politicians and the media have made it possible to seriously study problems concerning children and to elevate those concerns to a higher position on political agendas.

Third, we are all aware of the marvelous prospects for advance on children's behalf. Of course, many problems facing the children of the world are complex and involve tremendous resistance to improvement - problems such as drugs, street children and child abuse. In these fields we are still largely seeking to discover what to do to solve the problems, and we must push forward in this search. There are several other fields, however, such as immunization and oral rehydration therapy, which affect children on a massive scale and with life-or-death urgency, for which we know exactly what to do. And there is little actual resistance to doing it.

Latin America has taken a lead in ensuring that what is do-able on behalf of children gets done. Colombia was the pioneer in organizing a massive national social mobilization effort to immunize all of the country's children against the six main child-killing diseases. Scores of countries worldwide have followed their example. Costa Rica has achieved child mortality rates better than countries with more than twice its gross national product per capita. Nicaragua has had remarkable success teaching parents how to save their children from the fatal dehydration of diarrhoea.

Thanks to the advances of the past 20 years, there has never been a greater opportunity than now to do so much for so many and for so little a cost - both financially and politically. Thanks to technological progress we have such advances as the new and improved low-cost vaccines, and we have oral rehydration salts (ORS). Thanks to advances in communication we have radio and TV, which reach into the homes and touch the lives of virtually all the world's people. Thanks to the tremendous economic progress of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, we have schools in almost every village, and we have the means for families to buy radios and TVs, even in the most remote areas. People have created an infrastructure and have provided themselves with the means for progress.

In Latin America we see how much can be done. Whether we look to Nicaragua, Colombia, or Costa Rica, to name just a few, we see what can be done in putting these by-products of modern progress to use where it counts most. Thus, for example, if all of Latin America had the child mortality rates of Costa Rica in 1985, under-5 child deaths on the continent would have been reduced that year from more than a million to 306,000 - a saving of 725,000 lives - 2,000 each day.

To our Italian friends...

Speaking for a moment specifically to our Italian friends amongst this distinguished gathering, allow me to comment that the substantial amount of funds with which we have been involved in Central America have been used to leverage results far beyond the specific goals of the programmes supported. They have contributed to producing not only dramatic results in health, but also to what my friend the Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo initially labeled "Health as a Bridge to Peace". Thus we have seen the governments of Central America working together in an unprecedented manner despite conflicts. And the Italians, through their contributions, have helped to create the environment in which such a creative peace initiative could occur.

Was it only three years ago that all 7 Heads of State and Government in Central America joined together on television in support of child survival and development activities? So much has happened since then. Out of this effort came El Salvador's pioneering "Days of Tranquility", during which all parties in the civil conflict agree to a cease-fire for three days each year in order to allow the safe-conduct of child immunization campaigns. Thanks to these bold and determined efforts, child immunization rates for under-ones in El Salvador today are equal to or greater than those in New York City. Furthermore, the concept of "days of tranquility" has been effectively put to use in Lebanon, where all of the disparate factions in that country's civil strife agreed to a similar plan for all Lebanese children. And even now in the Sudan, where I am the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in charge of response to the current emergency, we have been able to build on this example to craft "corridors of tranquility" through a civil war. Thus a number of transport routes have been sanctioned by both government and rebels for safe-conduct of food and relief supplies to the southern part of the country before the summer rains begin. This effort, called "Operation Lifeline Sudan" is being urgently mounted in order to prevent a repetition of last year's massive starvation due to the deadly combination of drought, floods and civil-war.

UNICEF is proud to join with the Italian government and others in this room who have contributed to these historic advances for peace.

To the Ministers of Health...

To those in this room who are Ministers of Health, I have several messages to share with you today.

First and foremost is this: Fight for adjustment with a human face. Fight to mobilize support so that the health sector is adequately protected and not sacrificed nor utilized unrealistically.

Second: Fight to restructure - to "perastroika" - your own health sector budgets so that in the difficult times you are able to mount important health initiatives, even in the face of austerity. We have seen that it is possible

to make major advances with small but well-allocated budgets through the cost-effective primary health care programmes and approaches which have produced exemplary results in terms of child-health in such countries as Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Third: Now, 18 months before the 1990 deadline for UCI, I urge that each of you be absolutely certain that your goals for universal child immunization (UCI) is met - at least 80 per cent for each of the antigens against the six main child-killing diseases, and eradication of polio.

The world expects you to achieve the 1990 UCI goals, given the health facilities and basic infrastructure which is already in place in your countries. If nations such as China, Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco and Thailand can achieve UCI, certainly the Latin American countries, who have pioneered these techniques, can reach the target as well.

A truly significant inspiration which you can provide is eradication of polio by 1990. Your success in this will encourage the rest of the world to follow - to achieve global eradication by the year 2000. Your success in UCI in the next 18 months will prove to your many supporters around the world that the health sector can achieve the goals it sets for itself and can lead others toward great advances as well. Children can catalyze a coming-together and working-together that extends far beyond the scope of their immediate needs.

To the representatives of the Holy See...

To the representatives of the Holy See I must say that a proud contribution has been made by the Catholic Church to the survival, health and development of children, as we have witnessed now in so many countries, especially in the Latin American region. Your work has opened the door onto whole new realms of possibility for social mobilization, and we urge you to explore ever further. In fact, UNICEF gave its highest award to the Catholic Church in El Salvador two years ago for its work toward the "Days of Tranquility". But perhaps the most exciting aspect of the creative and powerful work the Church has initiated in support of the survival and development of children is that one cannot help but see that the new door you have come upon is barely jarred open, so much more is possible. You have shown the way toward what is possible on behalf of children by those outside of government sectors.

To international organizations and colleagues...

To my colleagues from WHO/PAHO and other international organizations, what message can I give to those of whom UNICEF is a part?

Experiences of recent years have illustrated what can come about through the mutual collaboration of governments and international organizations. A tremendous resource remains largely untapped in the synergistic combination of our cooperative efforts for common goals. Our challenge now is to find ways of exploiting these possibilities further. Successes in Central America have been a result of working together - PAHO, UNICEF, governments and donors.

Our challenge is to discover and design still more patterns for cooperation. I am much encouraged, for example, by the recent creative thinking between the Inter-American Development Bank and UNICEF regarding debt relief for child survival.

Together...for children...

and for the future of Latin America and the Caribbean

Gathered in this room are representatives of precisely those factions of society who, together, possess the potential to alter the course of history from simply fulfilling trend lines regarding the lives of our children - trend lines which would measure continued massive preventable child death, and a tragic loss of our civilization's most valuable resource. You - we - have the potential - we have the responsibility - to write an important part of the next chapter in Latin America's history.

The vision of what we could accomplish working together - countries, agencies, major donors - has been laid out in the Cocoyoc Declaration (attached). Latin America has, on an official level, prioritized possibilities for children which are do-able. In this they have set an example for the rest of the world. These goals, however, can only be achieved with the leadership and support of exactly those factions of the international community assembled in this room today.

As we enter the final decade of this millenium we may ask what more precious legacy could be left to the 21st century than the health and well-being of those people who will comprise the societies of the future - that is, the children of today. Perhaps, in fact, there is a greater gift. But it will be given through the same efforts. We will have constructed the gift if the civilization which we are now becoming - which we are molding through our actions - takes for granted that the well-being of children is everyone's concern; if, as a matter of course, we put issues related to children first among our priorities at all levels of society. Such an ethic will help ensure the well-being of children for generations to come, and it will offer evidence that we are progressing as a more just and humane civilization.