

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1989-0022

Contribution of Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to
New African Magazine

Summer 1989



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



Rcf0006HRP

Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02147

ExR/Code: CF/EXD/SP/1989-0022

New African Magazine. Contribution by Mr. James P. Grant,
Date Label Printed 18-Jan-2002

Cover + 3pp + 8 b



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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A growing awareness in Africa and throughout the world of the general constellation of influences affecting the continent's children is helping to chart the course for meaningful development activity. Africa today faces great hardship, and yet it is presented with prospects of promise.

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

Throughout most of Africa, average incomes have fallen by 10 to 25 per cent in the 1980s. The net transfer of resources leaving the continent is now greater than the inflow, with the difference measured in the billions of dollars annually. Levels of malnutrition, especially among children, and low birth weights have 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 1,000 young children have died each day in Africa in 1988 as a result of the slowing down or the reversal of progress in that continent.

Second, the adverse impact of these circumstances can be substantially ameliorated by adjustment with a human face. By this we mean protecting, rather than disproportionately cutting back, as so often has been the case, the investment on the human side during the process of adjusting national budgets to cope with Third World external debt and recession. 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 affect all people, e.g. in the health sector shifting from emphasis on expansion of costly hospitals to strengthening prevention and basic health services.

Third, war and destabilization have taken an unconscionable toll of young lives on the continent in the past year. The effects of conflict resulting from apartheid have taken the lives of some 140,000 young children in Mozambique and Angola alone in the past 12 months, as they have annually for at least the past 3 years, during which such quantifying has been undertaken. Civil war in the Sudan last year resulted in the deaths of 250,000 people, the majority of them children, and as this issue of "New African" goes to press, efforts are urgently underway through "Operation Lifeline Sudan" to prevent the loss of another 100,000 lives this year.

Fourth, we are all aware of the marvelous prospects for advance on children's behalf. For all of the complexities of conditions affecting the children of Africa, the vast majority of child deaths - and the grim reality is that 10,000 still die each day - are due to causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures and preventions. We know exactly what to do about the health problems which continue to take this tragic toll. And there is little actual resistance to doing it. The question, then, becomes more one of "whether" we are willing to muster the political will at all levels - community, district, national, regional and international - to transform today's possibilities for children into reality.

"What to do" includes, for example, achieving the goal of Universal Child Immunization which was set by the Health Ministers of Africa for 1990. With more than 2,000 young Africans dying each day for lack of 50 cents worth of vaccine in each, it is a means to make great strides with limited resources. And "what to do" includes spreading the use of Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) - the application at home by parents of a simple sugar and water solution capable of combatting the lethal effects of dehydration associated with diarrhoeal diseases - the number one killer of young children. Globally, the recent accelerated use of these two measures alone is responsible for saving the lives of 2.5 million young children in the past 12 months.

These and other low-cost/high-impact health measures, when combined with modern techniques of social mobilization and communication among the world's poor, have been singled out by many health experts for their collective potential to halve 1980 child mortality rates by the turn of the century. Africa has received an extra boost in advancing this potential "Child Survival and Development Revolution" (CSDR) - and all of primary health care - through the Bamako Initiative proposed by the African Ministers of Health in September 1987. The measures called for in the Bamako Initiative range from issues of community participation to major international support, and they hold the potential to make maternal and child health care available throughout Africa..

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, the Bamako Initiative is enabling participating African nations to take charge of local health needs, even in these times of economic hardship.

It is important to note that a comprehensive PHC system - including particularly education and an effective health infrastructure - will be Africa's main weapon against AIDS - an actual threat in itself, but also a great threat to other programmes as increasingly large sums are diverted to the necessary fight against this new and growing danger.

As the 1990s approach, far tougher choices than we have known in the past will face all those who are concerned with development in Africa. Among the many related activities this year, the 1989 Summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) will consider declaring the 1990s the "Decade of the African Child". This is a wise starting point, I believe, for a development strategy that can emphasize human development, since it is, after all, the children whose individual development and social contribution will shape the future of the world. A sage investment in children's health, nutrition and education will lay the foundation for future growth and development. On the other hand, neglecting children's basic survival, development and protection needs would condemn them - and all of Africa - to the vicious cycle of poverty, deprivation and underdevelopment.

The challenge at this juncture is to manifest the political will, vision and leadership to turn today's possibilities for children into realities - for the children - and the future - of Africa.