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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the opening of the
North American Regional Forum on Education for All

"New Alliances for Achieving Education for All"

Boston, Massachusetts
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"New Alliances for Achieving Education for All"

I am truly delighted to join in opening the North American Regional Forum on Education for All.

Some half a century ago, Arnold Toynbee observed that our era is the first in history in which it is possible to conceive of bringing the essential benefits of progress - of "civilization" - to all people. In the decades since, we have seen this potential unfolding in field after field.

It can, in fact, be argued that sharing the benefits of progress among vastly larger proportions of society will be necessary in the years ahead, whether one is planning for industrialized countries to maintain their growth in the future, or working to help enable the poor in developing societies to contribute to the march of progress.

The main tool we have for transforming this historically unprecedented possibility into reality is education - education through formal schooling, through self-learning, and through non-formal means including radio, television, religious and commercial channels.

That the benefits of progress could be brought to all people, and the role that education can play in this, are clear, for example, in the health field. As the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Nakajima, told health educators in August 1988:

"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. A recent report by the U.S. Surgeon General indicated that diet and food habits are implicated in two-thirds of all deaths in the United States. A study just completed in India has shown that about 600,000 Indians die from tobacco-related diseases a year; the worldwide total, as estimated by WHO, is 2.5 million deaths per year."

Dr. Nakajima is telling us in this that knowledge - "self-health" knowledge - could make a life-or-death difference for massive numbers of people in industrialized and developing countries alike.

And basic knowledge - knowledge which is already available - can make the crucial difference in other aspects of people's lives, beyond health. In agriculture, for example, the effectiveness of farmers depends on the knowledge that they have. A recent study reported in the background documents for this Forum concluded that a minimum of four years of primary education increased farmer productivity by an average of 8.7 per cent for all countries and 10 per cent for those undergoing modernization and growth. Similarly, several studies have established that the more education a mother has, the fewer children are desired in her family, and the greater the survival rate of those who are born. Studies have also shown that in any income level, families were better fed the higher the mothers' education.

Empowerment through knowledge

This conference on "Education for All" comes at a most opportune time. Where there used to be hills of knowledge, today there are Himalayan mountains of knowledge - mountains growing taller with each passing decade. When we are addressing the issue of education for all, we must look, in effect, to the relatively disadvantaged, to those removed from the easy channels of sharing knowledge - whether it is the 50 per cent of South Asia's population which lives in poverty, or the more than 10 per cent of North America's families living below the poverty line. And among these poor, the suffering of massive numbers of people could be alleviated and their lives could be improved, if only they were empowered with relevant knowledge - knowledge which is already in existence. This includes, of course, knowledge of how to obtain more life-enhancing knowledge - or learning how to learn.

Not only does such knowledge open new opportunities for confronting old problems; it is also crucial for facing major emerging problems such as drug abuse and AIDS, against which our most effective weapon is prevention through education. Similarly, education regarding the harmful effects of some life-style habits of the affluent are our best defense against cancer and heart problems.

It is also important to note that progress in almost any social sector - whether it is increased immunization coverage or the use of appropriate agricultural technology - depends on education in order for that progress to be sustained.

Bridging the knowledge-gap

Yet with all of these possibilities so close at hand, never before in history has there been such a gap between knowledge capable of improving people's well-being and its availability to those who most need to know. The need is to go beyond a linear expansion of present educational efforts; furthermore, even the maintenance of the present activities is threatened in many countries by an unfortunate combination of economic adjustment without "a human face" in response to financial difficulties and benign neglect at a time when there is an almost universal shift toward greater reliance on market mechanisms. In the 37 poorest nations, spending per head on education has been reduced by 25 per cent over the past few years.

What can we do to help bridge this knowledge-gap? How do people become empowered with knowledge? How do they become motivated to use knowledge to promote the kind of change which contributes to this progress? These questions, I believe, define one of the most important challenges of our era, and they are precisely the questions which face this conference.

In seeking to help in the empowerment of people with knowledge, several basic factors have to be taken into account, some of them relatively new.

First, we know that learning begins at birth; the ability to acquire knowledge and to participate actively in further learning, both in and out of school, depends on the physical, mental, and social development and learning that occurs prior to age 6.

Second, we know that all people need to be given an opportunity for at least several years of schooling, and that a special effort is required in many countries to bring young girls into the schooling system. We welcome the action by seven South Asian countries in declaring 1990 the "Year of the Girl Child", with its promise to promote equity in enrollment.

Third, we all know that there are major improvements which need to be made to make schooling more relevant and of higher quality.

Fourth, we know that in many parts of the world we need to lower costs of schooling if we are to universalize education, and to reach the hundreds of millions currently unreached by the schooling process.

Fifth, the past 50 years has not only brought a tremendous increase of knowledge relevant to people's well-being, but at the same time, a virtual revolution has occurred in our capacity to communicate it - e.g., by electronic media, radio, TV, computers, fax. The technology surrounding communication has been advancing exponentially. Every few years, the costs of communicating are halved. This is one of the few areas in our society in

which costs are going steadily down and are projected to keep going down - while almost everything else - meat, cars, just about any consumer product - seems to be becoming more and more expensive. How do we take advantage of this "communications revolution"?

Sixth, we know that communication of knowledge - education - can come through many channels, and new uses are rapidly being discovered for the new technologies. Don't we hear often in this country that children learn more today through TV than they do in school? How important, then, are media influences where schools are either non-existent or of very low quality? It is old news today to note that the radio is ubiquitous, and even VCRs can be found in large supply in some of the most remote and poorest corners of the world, including in the roadless valleys of the two Yemens. How do we put these new resources to their fullest use? Programmes like Sesame Street give us just an indication of the new potential. The willingness of The Walt Disney Company - certainly among the world's most effective communicators - to work in partnership with us holds major promise for the 1990s.

How much more important, also, can be the religious communicators, our traditional "educators", who have been newly empowered by the modern means of communications for education? And how can they contribute far more toward the goals of empowering people with knowledge and learning skills?

Mobilizing all channels

From UNICEF's vantage in the field of child health, we have experienced in the 1980s the potential of mobilizing the channels of communication to make sweeping changes in one sector, and one can extrapolate the potential for applying these same mobilization techniques to other sectors. As Dr. Nakajima said, the majority of child deaths are preventable, "if only (the parents) were properly informed and motivated".

Earlier in this decade, readily available child health knowledge and low-cost technology were coupled with our new capacity to communicate with and among the poor of the world. Dr. Nakajima mentioned two main low-cost health interventions - universal child immunization and oral rehydration therapy. Another handful of low-cost/high-impact measures were singled out as capable of making a major impact in children's survival and development. They included: a return to the widespread use of breast-feeding with proper weaning practices, growth monitoring to warn of impending malnutrition, family spacing, female literacy, and food supplementation when necessary. This vital knowledge for family health has been assembled in 55 messages incorporated in 10 clusters in Facts for Life, the publication jointly issued by the WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF in 1989.

We are learning that if these can just be communicated to the communities and families who need the knowledge and basic support, a virtual revolution - a Child Survival and Development Revolution (CSDR) - can actually be achieved. These revolutionary possibilities can become realities, however, if, and only if, the popular and political will manifest to make them happen.

It was really in the effort to make this Child Survival and Development Revolution happen that the concept of social mobilization for educational communication was realized. A massive educational process was undertaken, starting on the immunization front. In country after country, all sectors of society have been mobilized: hundreds of thousands of religious leaders have spoken from their pulpits about the importance of immunizing children; millions of teachers have volunteered time and incorporated this knowledge in their curricula. Women's groups, unions, civic organizations, government as well as non-governmental organizations have joined in. The media has played a major role in this all along - from hundreds and thousands of radio spots explaining the necessity of a second round of vaccinations, "even though the baby was feverish after the first shot", to internationally televised child survival messages "advertised" on soccer field billboards. The surface has barely been scratched in the media's potential role.

To make a long and inspiring story short, global immunization coverage of young children against the six main child-killing diseases increased from 10 per cent at the beginning of this decade, to almost 70 per cent today. Last year the lives of 2 million children were saved as a result of these efforts alone...and we can readily see the possibility of increasing this by a further 2 million annually in the years immediately ahead. It is worth noting that by last year the lives of another 1 million children were saved by the use of oral rehydration therapy, and its annual usage is increasing rapidly as a result of educational mobilizations.

The number of children who currently die from causes which are readily preventable at low cost is equivalent to the entire death toll of last year's Armenian earthquake each day. Now, something is beginning to be done about that. And it is happening mostly through education. It is happening by involving all sectors, all factions of society to work together at empowering each other, at learning to find out what is needed to meet the basic needs of life, and ensure - demand - that those needs are filled.

The success of these activities and the extent of the participation involved have so elevated the way children's issues are perceived that there is now very serious talk of holding a World Summit for Children next year. More than 100 countries have endorsed the idea of holding the first-ever North/South/East/West Summit in order to bring children's issues soundly into their rightful place: high on our world's political agendas. Such a Summit would be an historically unprecedented opportunity to stimulate national mobilizations through which all communication - educational - channels could be used to empower people with relevant knowledge.

Everyone's concern: Education for All

As we translate these child survival and development experiences directly to the education field, we see quite clearly that "education for all" cannot be accomplished by the education sector alone, nor by governments alone. If we want to take this goal seriously, a major alliance of new partners must be brought into the act.

Nor is this a task only for the sake of the Third World. Surely, the strongest benefit of global enthusiasm for basic Education for All will be felt by the world's poor. But, as an indication of problems in education shared by industrialized as well as developing countries, besides the 900 million to 1 billion illiterates in the Third World, there are close to 30 million functional adult illiterates in the U.S. and Canada.

Furthermore, rich and poor nations alike share such problems as drop-outs, dated or otherwise irrelevant curricula, and low quality education that is inordinately expensive, to name but a few.

We are all faced with the common challenge: How do we better prepare children for schooling and schools for children so as to make the formal education system more relevant and less expensive? Industrialized countries must seriously face the relevancy issue, and also must take the lead - with creativity - in discovering how to modernize these new revolutionary communications mechanisms for formal instruction. Developing countries must discover how to make the formal systems both lower cost, and, even more importantly, more relevant, and capable of retaining students.

Throughout the world, breakthroughs are occurring, in isolated instances, in overcoming these problems. How do we go-to-scale on the lessons being learned? Obviously, much more evaluation and research and dissemination of the results is required. One's imagination is piqued by the massive Integrated Child Development Service in India which reaches 20 million children, ages 0-6, in a combined program of health, nutrition and non-formal pre-schooling. Or by experiments such as the new primary school model being developed in Bangladesh, in which the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), a non-governmental organization, is working with the government among the poorest of landless families. BRAC started 22 experimental low cost village schools in 1985, and has already expanded to 2,500, with another 2,000 slated to open by 1991. Daily attendance rate is over 95 per cent and the drop-out rate is only 1.5 per cent. Some apparently brilliant innovations in management, in training of teachers, fostering of parent participation, and development of relevant curricula and effective pedagogy may well be replicable at low cost in many other settings.

Basic challenges

At this Regional Forum, we face two basic challenges. First, how can basic education be universalized? How do we put the all in "education for all"? How do we reach the people in the margins of society with basic life skills?

The second basic challenge is how to greatly increase the effectiveness of the existing knowledge/communication system for the purpose of empowering people with knowledge relevant to their well-being? What can be done, by people like us and by those whom we can influence, to help facilitate processes through which people will have several times the relevant knowledge - than they do today?

Morality must march with capacity

We have been speaking today, and others will speak throughout this Forum, about new opportunities in education which have major historical significance. An unprecedented capacity exists to improve the well-being of vast numbers of people's lives through modern means of education and communication. But much more than new opportunities are before us. Morality must march with capacity - a morality born of the realization that it is unconscionable not to act, when so much can be done for so many, and for so little cost. Thus, along with our new capacity comes a new responsibility.

In fact, before the actual "World Conference on Education for All" meets in Thailand in March, it is anticipated that the Convention on the Rights of the Child will be both adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and that it will also be well on the way towards being ratified by at least 20 countries, the number required to bring the new charter into force. The Convention, which provides an important internationally-agreed standard, asserts the right of the child to an education, and also to education about child survival and development issues. Children's rights, of course, translate in reality to adults' responsibilities. Thus, the Convention asserts the responsibility of States to several specific measures in providing an education for children, based on the recognition of:

"...the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity."

Furthermore, the Convention asserts the responsibility of States:

"To ensure that all segments of society, in particular parents and children, are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, the advantages of breast-feeding, hygiene and environmental sanitation and the prevention of accidents."

Gathered in this room is an extremely influential cross-section of the education community which, in its entirety and in collaboration with a vast network of new alliances, has the capacity to design how education is conducted, and to what extent it is implemented, in the future. You - we - have the potential through this Forum and the Thailand Conference - we have the responsibility - to write an important part of the next chapter in the history of human progress: the "Education for All" chapter.

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 education and health 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. The single greatest gift of this century could be crystallized during the coming decade. It would be to mobilize and restructure, in the 1990s, all existing channels of education - of communication - for empowering people, including particularly those

currently largely unreached, far more than ever before, with the vital relevant knowledge presently available. If this is accomplished, societies of the future will take for granted that education is everyone's concern and responsibility. Such an ethic would help ensure the well-being of children for generations to come, and it would offer convincing evidence that we are progressing as a more just and humane civilization.

The Thailand Conference on Meeting Basic Learning Needs has the potential to become the turning point in the field of basic education, much as 1978 in Alma Ata was the pivotal moment for those committed to "Health for All". It is a formidable challenge - one which we could only dream to meet with the intensive leadership of exactly those of us gathered here today. Can we bring the benefits of modern progress - through education - to all? For the future of our children - and of our world - together, I think we can.