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Policy Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the opening of the
34th Annual Meeting of the National Committees for UNICEF

Geneva, Switzerland
23 May 1989

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AT THE OPENING OF THE 34TH ANNUAL MEETING
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Geneva, 23 May 1989

I must say it's nice to be back with all of you, it's a very familiar feeling. As I look at most of you, this brings back memories of all sorts of involvements in your own countries and various Board members at various exciting times. It's nice for me to see Aldo Farina back after his bad bout of illness. I just feel that we are a part, the inner core, of the Grand Alliance for children and I thought that I might just take a few minutes to talk about the atmosphere in which our efforts are taking place to set the scene for that which we can do, that which we may not be able to do, and some of the major threats we have to cope with.

There's good news; clearly very much in the fore is the prospect that the Cold War, as we have known it in the post-World War II era, both in its military expenditures and dangerous side and in terms of its ideological confrontation appears definitely to be easing and changing its character and one can therefore think that five years from now the world can be a very different place from that which it was five years ago.

And we see this in Central America, we see it in Afghanistan, we see it in South East Asia, we saw it in a recent meeting between General Secretary Gorbachov and Deng Xiaoping in China, and we certainly have seen it in manifestations such as when Mr Reagan went to Moscow last May. Clearly, the implications are changing at the super power level. For the first time in a decade this insane arms race which has topped a trillion dollars seems to be "plateauing" and one can foresee significant reductions over the next several years and on the part of most major powers. All of this is being accompanied by a broader climate for peace, for example in Iran and Iraq, and in part because the major super powers were prepared to work together for an Iran-Iraq solution. So this is already one of the beneficial by-products of the changing global scene on the East/West side.

We've seen the reconciliation between Somalia and Ethiopia, we see in Namibia the change of scene, and within Angola it now looks as if the next step towards reconciliation is probably underway. We're also seeing a broad force - in the last six or seven years - of a greater desire for people to participate in the political management of their countries. We saw this, first really in this decade, in

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Latin America where the push for democracy and greater participation has been a major development and has proved quite durable despite tremendous economic problems that have confronted the new democracies. We've seen it in the Philippines, we've seen it in South Korea, we've seen it in Eastern Europe, we've seen it in the Soviet Union and we're seeing a still developing stage in Tiananmen Square, in Beijing, where a scene is being acted out for greater participation of people in the management of their countries.

Another positive aspect is that there is a new confidence that we really can achieve some goals for children. It's hard to visualize a Board Meeting in 1980 that could have been discussing a Strategy for the 1980s, the way we are now discussing a Strategy for the 1990s. And if we had been discussing a Strategy for the 1980s, the way we are now discussing the strategies for the 1990s, most people would have treated it as a rather 'up here' exercise that had relatively little relevance with what UNICEF would actually do, whereas in the discussions that took place at this Board, on Strategies for the 1990s, one could identify with every one of these just what it is that UNICEF would be called upon to do.

And not only what the Secretariat would be called upon to do, or what National Committees would be called upon to do, it is a very major new development. It's paralleled of course by the progress on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it's been paralleled in the most extreme form by the proposal for a summit. We now have more than 45 governments which have spoken in support of this idea of a Summit for Children.

And it was noteworthy that, when I was in Moscow, on my way to Khartoum, two weeks ago, there was great interest in the USSR in the subject, including the possibilities that the leadership for convening it might be taken by the USSR and the United States if there were difficulties in organization from the other fronts.

Now we've also seen, in this, a whole new role for the United Nations, of which UNICEF is, of course, a part. Of virtually all the political confrontations that have been diffused, the UN has played a significant role, in a great majority: in Iran and Irak, in Afghanistan, in Namibia and this has brought with it a new degree of respect and popularity for the UN.

Gallup polls, in the United States in December, were in fascinating contrast with the Gallup polls of the year before. Then, the public opinion in support of the UN in the United States, was the lowest since the founding of the UN. By December 1988, in that fickle world of public opinion, it was the highest ever in the United States, with the lowest degree of hostility to the UN - which does indicate a major shift.

This has meant that there is a renewed opportunity for attention to global issues. Let's take on more global confrontations that threaten us all, of which, for example, environmental problems have been cited. But we've also seen increased attention to such issues as drugs on the global scale, for the Bangkok Education for All Conference which is in the spirit of the Alma Ata Conference that took place some eleven years ago in Alma Ata in the USSR, that has meant so much in the health field. We also saw the initiative the Secretary General took in the Sudan and you may not recognize it but it's very rare that the United Nations Secretary General has taken the sort of initiative he has taken in the Sudan.

The Sudan problem is an internal civil war and normally the UN stays out of this sort of an issue, but the dimension was such, and the changed atmosphere for the UN was such, that the Secretary General felt the freedom to move and to make the intervention that led to the jointly convened conference by the Minister of Sudan and by the Secretary General, on 8-9 March 1989, to come up with a co-ordinated, comprehensible approach to prevent a repetition in 1989 of the disaster in 1988 when some 250.000 persons, mostly children, died.

Still on the positive side, Western Europe and North America are in a period of unparalleled prosperity. On Friday, 19 May 1989, if I remember correctly, the stock market in the United States topped the level of the pre-crash two years ago. It's at this level that we'll see, in the European Community, the movement of 1992, one of a great feeling of buoyancy and positiveness.

Well, these are all the good news within which we work. On the other hand we must ask "where is the bad news?" And I think it's worth reminding ourselves that there's plenty of bad news that we somehow have to cope with as we look and move ahead.

First and foremost as particularly bad news for children, we're very aware of the tragic economic situation in Latin America and Africa. Last December, when we issued the State of the World Children Report, we said that more than 500.000 children had died in Africa and Latin America as a consequence of the negative effects of the economic crisis of these two continents - with the debt crisis implications very much in the foreground there.

And one unfortunately can say today, in May 1989, that in the past twelve months the basic situation has not, - in terms of children - yet improved, in either of these continents.

There have been hopeful signs at the Toronto Global Summit eleven months ago, where a formulation was articulated for dealing with public debt that is the heart of the African death problem, but only fractionally has that been implemented as yet.

In Latin America, the Baker plan has been, at last, pronounced inadequate and there is a Brady plan that for the first time talks about debt relief - cancellation of debts - but this still remains to be implemented. The people that are talking about it are talking about maybe a 15-20% debt relief when we really should be talking of a 30-40% debt relief for the Third World as a whole. There has been, as yet, no major discussion on how we restore the capital flow to the Third World where we had ten years ago a thirty billion dollar netflow to the Third World and last year we had nearly forty billion dollar netflow from the Third World to the industrial world. And this shift in the pattern has yet really to take place. So after all, events in Latin America remain very worrisome.

It does mean that, for us in UNICEF, our continued attention is needed to Adjustment with a Human Face - in particular, those economies that are still adjusting: to protect the investment of funds in the social sectors, but equally to keep pushing the social sectors to revamp themselves to be more effective and to put more money, as we have seen, in the health field, on the priorities of the child survival development revolution rather than into expensive facilities such as hospitals.

Even the political advances that we've been talking about in Iran/Irak, in Central America, in Afghanistan, remain very fragile. There has been a break-through, but none of these major political break-throughs have yet been completed.

Iran/Irak has a cease-fire, but nothing further yet, and the only constructive single piece of joint enterprise that has been done was the UNICEF initiative to help rebuild the Maternal Child Health facilities in the two countries in the devastated areas. Everything else remains in a period of tenseness and without a settlement yet.

In Central America and Afghanistan, the tragedy remains to be played out to the full. So we have these problems, and again for us in UNICEF, each of these crises raises a need for us to think in terms of how to help children. At this moment we have to advance the peace process because it is true of Central America or in Iran/Irak or I would suggest even with Afghanistan, the conflicting factions are still prepared to do things for children before they do it for something else. And they can continue to build bridges for peace.

The global shift of all economies towards less state control and to more market-directed control of economies, is a phenomenon that is going on in virtually every major society in the world. And it includes dictatorial countries. Certainly, in the United States as well as in the USSR and China shifts are taking place.

It is noteworthy for us to remember, in this massive shift towards more market control for the economies that there is need for great vigilance so that in the process of adjustment children don't get the short end of the stick again. And I think that, if we can say, for example of the United States and the U.K., in both these societies, which have had strong economies in the last six or seven years, the basic condition of the poorest children is worse off than it was six or seven years ago. This is very clear from the statistics of the United States.

We've become accustomed to talking about Adjustment with a Human Face in the Third World, as they deal with the adjustment process, but there is a need to be far more conscious that in many, not all, of the industrialized countries as they make the shift, children are getting the short end of the stick.

For example in China when they made the shift away from communes, neighbourhood associations towards a more market-oriented economy, the initial impact on the primary health care system, the barefoot doctor's system that the world so admired and the pre-school systems, was devastating. A third to a half of all pre-schools in China closed. And only a part of that has been restored. The cutback in the attention to health services by the three million doctors shifted from being part of a system to fee-for-service. There was a de-emphasis on school education, de-emphasis on water purification, and one of the major roles for UNICEF in China has been to legitimize the discussion that if you are changing your economic system it changes the way in which you support the services that the vulnerable need - health and education and welfare - UNICEF has made a very valuable contribution in legitimizing discussion of these issues so that they would not be treated as counter-revolutionary, people were afraid to raise these issues for fear of being seen as opponents of change within China.

Finally, we have still ahead a very stormy economic prospect, and most of you come from the industrialized countries where for the moment the economy seems to be going reasonably well. But it is very clear that there are two sets of problems in the industrialized world that are quite unresolved yet and hold very stormy prospects ahead.

The first, of course, is among the countries of what some might call the industrialized North-West, the disequilibrium between a United States which currently is importing capital at the rate of some hundred and fifty billion dollars a year. It is the biggest foreign aid programme that any region of the world has ever had. When you realize that the Marshall Plan was fifteen billion dollars spread over four years, and the dollar was a very different dollar, the United States is now getting capital flows of nearly a hundred and fifty billion dollars a year from the rest of the world. This is a very artificial stimulus for the US economy, but in a sense the US economy has been the engine of growth for the world, within the last seven or eight years.

And Japan, Germany and Western Europe are still building up surpluses. To get this reconciled, there will have to be a major adjustment somewhere down the line, four or five years from now and there are those of us who argue that it can only be done through growth and through restoring global growth by getting the Third World going again so that the adjustment process can take place in that kind of a global scene.

This is very difficult and it's equally clear that when one gets down to the socialist economies as they move towards a partial market economy, the question is how far do you go, where to draw the line between market economy and central controls; it is very uneven.

The Chinese economy is moving into a new crisis. It was the first of the economies to make this transition but part of the difficulties that you see in China today, is the fact that with twenty five to forty percent inflation a year, which they've had the last two to three years, their own system has not yet made the transition, quite apart from the political interaction of this process.

In the USSR, clearly, too, with their period of Perestroika, the economic benefits of change are not yet present.

We clearly have on our scene some very major problems along with the hopeful signs that I was describing. For us in UNICEF, I would argue that this requires that we, as a group, fight to keep children on the global agenda. We have the great advantage, that as we've all said repeatedly, there never have been so many doable things for children at relatively low cost, in history.

And as Dr Nakajima is fond of pointing out, two-thirds of the forty thousand children who die everyday, do so from causes that are readily preventable at low cost, primarily through empowering parents today with far more knowledge.

And this is a great asset that we have. Because if forty thousand children die from causes that are very difficult to assess, it's one thing, but when forty thousand children die, two thirds of them from utterly, easily, manageable, preventable, causes, at least it's unconscionable not to mobilize, not to at least do the doable. And I think our challenge is, during these difficult times, to keep the spotlight on the doables and make sure that the doables are done, while encouraging the kind of groping research such as the much more difficult problems of drug abuse, street children do require. We don't have low cost, doable answers yet - these are still the problems that need to be wrestled with.

The second implication of this, of course, is that we must all work together to make sure that, in at least a few doable areas we succeed. There is a tendency at the present moment to assume that we've succeeded on the Universal Child Immunisation Front and people say: let's go on to the next issue. We have succeeded remarkably well, having gone from less than ten per cent immunisation levels to now more than two thirds, worldwide, but we are still far off, from that point of view of success that is required eighteen months from now and we need to make sure that we can then go on to the others.

There are a series of these doable things of great significance, the eradication of polio, measles, Guinea worm, and very important, the opportunities for a whole new initiative on basic education, with its primary school emphasis, its curriculum, its universal attendance, the whole adult literacy, particularly for women, and the great potential for non-formal education that is epitomized by the Facts for Life package, which can be communicated through so many channels whether formal, like schools, or by radio and television.

Obviously as we raise money, for the National Committees, there's a tremendous common, combining role, of fund-raising and advocacy.

Fund-raising, which so many of you have been doing, which has been built around CSDR has been a tremendous educational tool at the same time that you have been raising money. I must say that what the Rotary International does with their massive efforts at Polio Plus is an illustration, in a more narrow area, of how you can combine consciousness-raising and participation with fund-raising. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is an area in which we clearly must push on to success in the next year. I must say thanks to the incredible work by so many of you as well as the Secretariat and Non-Governmental Organizations. This one seems to be moving, you'll be discussing it more, and, we still have lying ahead, the whole question of what happens on the summit issue.

Now the implications of this for the UNICEF Secretariat side is that we have needed to significantly strengthen, over the last several years, our capacity for information, for public affairs, for the Grand Alliance and for supporting the National Committees who are such an integral part and core of this Grand Alliance.

This is what Victor was describing a few minutes ago, our efforts to restructure within UNICEF so that we could build a stronger capacity. To do this, we strengthened the Division of Information and the Division of Public Affairs by making them two. At the same time we have an increased need to bring them together in synergistic interaction. But I think what we are emphasizing is that the synergistic action needs to come with the Programme Division, with the Front Office, and with our allies.

All of this, as I see it, carries with it major implications of further growth for the roles of National Committees, and UNICEF on its side must therefore find ways to both strengthen the linkage of National Committees with Board policy and also find the means to support you more effectively than we have in the past.

This comes at the same time as we see a greater role for the National Committees in fund-raising. Now you've always played an important role in raising money per sale. Through Greeting Cards, through your own actions. But on three fronts we are receiving significant potential for additional action. One of course is in the impact on governmental action. Now we've seen this most clearly in the United States where, each year, the National Committee has played a role in the US government contribution which practically doubled what the US administration initially asked.

In countries such as Japan, the Parliamentary Committee, which Mrs. Hashimoto and the National Committee had such a role in putting it together, is beginning to have a very significant impact upon the governmental attitudes towards funding for UNICEF.

At the same time I think we all feel that there is a greater role for private fund-raising over and above our traditional ways of raising money and that this can come both through specific private fund raising activities but also with much greater use of allies.

When I was in Japan last week, one deals with groups such as the Risso Koshei Kai and the Buddhist Women's Association and a variety of these bodies, which actually are contributing very substantial sums through the National Committees to enhance the resources available for UNICEF as well as for publications.

Clearly there is a greater continuing role in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. You've got started in this, but once the Convention is adopted we still have the question: What happens in the industrial countries in terms of adoption of the Convention? Is the Convention just to be adopted by Third World countries? We all know very well that if it is just a Third World Convention, it won't have nearly the integrity to the process as it would have if the industrialized countries, - where you come from - make it an integrated part of their system.

Clearly there is a much greater role for advocacy towards the new ethos of both the "children first" and frankly the unconscionability of the twenty five 25,000 that die each day so completely unnecessarily.

When one thinks back to last fall when the world responded to the Armenian disaster, the daily toll of preventable child deaths each day exceeds the toll of the Armenian disaster. That ethos is beginning to get communicated but is as yet to really take root.

There is clearly also a greater role for combining fund-raising with advocacy and I think we are off to a good start. There are many, many countries doing both. But I would argue that there is a new frontier that still lies ahead in this.

Now we also are seeing all sorts of other implications for the National Committees, One is increasingly National Committees are part of the Executive Board Delegations. It's an interesting, juxtaposition because on the one hand we work together on the implementation level, and on the other hand you are having a part in the policy level and how to carry off this balance of different roles is a tricky one. It takes a certain amount of responsibility and restraint on both sides to do it on a successful basis and to capture the full proofs. It has meant that, basically, in my judgement, a tremendous strengthening of the delegations to have this participation. I would also say it strengthens the National Committees, when they go back after participating in this, in implementing Board policies because you intellectually have gone through much more of the process. But it is a sensitive area.

I see a major opportunity in the times ahead for greater participation in the very special symposia convened by UNICEF. For example, the Artists and Intellectuals Meeting at Harare which Ms. Palme attended and participated in a major way. Another major meeting under preparation is the Bangkok Education For All Conference. I would hope that there would be participation of National Committees in that exercise.

Let me deal with just two other topics briefly. One is the Summit, it is an idea that still moves ahead. I am quite convinced if we had not had our involvement in the Sudan and we had been able to put the corporate time into supporting development of this idea, we would today have a summit. This is one of the prices that we're paying for work overload that we're all familiar with. If time had not gone into others we could have achieved substantially more results. I still think that this one is moving forward and there is at least a fifty - fifty chance there will be such a summit and for certain if there is a global summit on other issues this will now be incorporated within it.

Let me conclude really on the Sudan and say that this is a piece of very creative opportunity but it is also, if I may mix my smile, it is very thin ice that we are on.

We all know that a major civil war is a very dangerous thing to get caught in the middle of, and, what with UNICEF leadership, the UN has done in the Sudan is to come up with several major innovations.

The first is that for the first time in history, with a major civil war going on, we have been able to get both parties to agree to a detailed plan of action as to who should be reached, with what kinds of goods, what kinds of tonnage, and both sides have agreed on the million or so that need to be reached on each side, the kind of assistance that they need, the routes by which these supplies should be brought in. And to have both sides in agreement is a very unusual thing.

Second, this concept of the corridors of tranquility which has grown from the days of tranquility that were devised for El Salvador. We watched this concept grow, the days of tranquility in El Salvador grew out of the endless search of Nils Thedin for zones of peace for children and in that search we came up with this concept of days of tranquility. We watched the idea grow and now we have in the Sudan this concept of these corridors of tranquility. Now if you look at the Sudan today, why I say it is dangerous, why the ice is very thin, is that it has taken short of a near miracle to get to these stages, not the least of which has been the full-hearted financial support which had come from the donors for this operation.

The operation is basically working, in the sense that the two parties are still holding to the common plan. In important areas it is functioning very well. You have a small armada of planes flying into besieged government towns and into SPLA controlled areas. The rebels could easily shoot down the planes going into the besieged government towns, the Sudanese government with its airforce could just as easily destroy the airports from which we are landing in the SPLA areas. The shipment of supplies, in from the South, are moving relatively smoothly even though there are tribal conflicts in there that are'nt easy. You've all read about the couple of convoys that have been ambushed. There's some degree of instability there.

We are focussing on the two most important corridors, those coming down by rail from central Sudan into the southern Sudan and down the Nile. Both of these are, by far, the most important and also the most complex. Important because they can continue functioning in the rainy season and frankly on the train you can move a lot of tonnage and on barges you can move even more tonnage as compared to aeroplanes. For example trucks are trying to drive their way through increasingly muddy roads. But the complicating factor on these two corridors is that their path alternate through government areas, SPLA areas, government areas, SPLA areas, unescorted and lots of people become involved. And there are many opportunities for people who don't want the operation to succeed, to interfere.

Many of you may have followed the pattern of the train, the train from Muglad. The train actually left two days ago, and it got out of the government area into the guerilla area and, as you may have heard Sunday morning, it was hijacked by a group of about a hundred men who threatened to kill Mr Brian Wannop, the Special Coordinator for the Sudan Emergency in Khartoum, and the two UN observers who were volunteers for Medecins sans Frontières, France. Their lives were actually threatened.

Ultimately the railway workers, some hundred of them, interceded and the train proceeded after everybody was stripped of their watches, their transistor radios, anything of personal value. The train went on and reached its first destination and at the moment it is dropped one third of its cargo, but it still needs to go on.

There are many groups who don't want this to succeed, so we are going to see these kinds of questions. Now people will be saying you talked about moving more than a hundred thousand tons before the rains close down the communication systems. And at the present moment we are roughly half that level. And my guess is that we'll move at least another 35,000 - 40,000 tons, but we will fall short and it is important that we remember in this discussion that, when we started out to do the operation, we emphasized that it was going to take a series of near miracles to produce a successful result. But frankly, we couldn't afford not to try.

Secondly, that the greatest force working for us for success is world public opinion. Now both parties to the civil war, I think, were badly shaken at the time, after last fall, in winter, when they saw the dimensions of the mayhem that happened because of their own actions. So there is on both sides a willingness to be more careful in this but both sides have all sorts of short-term objectives. And it is worldwide public opinion that is basically the force that keeps its strongest sense of responsibility on both of them.

And its the threat of public opinion and the effect of descending massively on them that keep both sides functioning. Now that means that we must keep great public attention on the Sudan. But the very fact that we keep the great public attention on the Sudan in terms of spot light also means that it is very easy for us to be criticized as we move forward on a two steps forward, one step backward basis. I do think that the prospects are such, that we will basically succeed in our mission, unless the current problems on the corridors, the rail convoys breakdown. I think we will succeed.

You'll be getting in your press, in your countries, a question about this, and I think you will need to emphasize to them that we all agreed at the outset that what we started out to do was one that most objective observers would say was unlikely to succeed. But it was one for which we had no alternative but to try. And so far the try has brought a very substantial degree of success with it.

I would say that it is very clear that this summer and fall, we are going to need additional resources. And we really do look to the National Committees to play a substantial role in mobilizing resources for this rather incredible operation. I would say to you, National Committees, that in some ways, it's a living memorial to Nils Thedin, one of your colleagues. It is the biggest effort ever tried to apply his concept, a zone of peace, of innovation, of imagination, of creativity, to a mammoth problem.

Of those two hundred and fifty thousand who died last year well over half were small children, who are the most vulnerable. With that, let me just close by saying that I think that we, in the UNICEF family, are at the most exciting time in our history.

And as we look ahead, we can foresee, I think, some incredible opportunities to do things, as well as incredible need for us. And I believe that we have never been better equipped to make a contribution than we are today. And all of you will be making your inputs, there will be new people coming into the scene, some of you will be bowing out, like Sir Bernhard Ledwidge with whom I have worked as a long friend, will be bowing out at the end of this year. It is a process of renewal for all of us and I'm very glad to be with you here, today, and to participate in these discussions.

Thank you.