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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Rotary Club of Hong Kong

"PolioPlus – A Dream Come True, A Lesson for the Future"

Hong Kong
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"PolioPlus -- A Dream Come True, A Lesson For The Future."

It has been a delight to come to Hong Kong for my working honeymoon. And I am honored to address the distinguished entrepreneurs from the Hong Kong chapter of Rotary International.

It is a special privilege to address you because Rotary International is one of UNICEF's most valued allies in the global struggle for child survival.

There is little doubt that at the heart of UNICEF's Grand Alliance for Children, within the core of our growing critical mass of support for children in Asia and throughout the world, are the one million businessmen and women, in 166 countries, who make this organization what it is today.

I have had the good fortune to meet your cohorts and see your impressive work in nearly every corner of the world. Today, I come, partly, to bring you the gratitude of tens of thousands of young children whose lives you have helped save every year.

For more than eight decades, Rotary International has established a standard for promoting humanitarian service, high ethical values and world peace that most other service organizations can only seek to emulate.

We all know that Rotarians were present at the creation of the United Nations, and actively involved in the formation of its charter. And we all know that Rotary International sponsors the largest privately funded scholarship exchange program, involving some 13,000 people, worldwide, each year.

But if I may borrow from the title of a Rotary International video tape, allow me to suggest that surely your "Finest Hour" has been the success of "Polio Plus."

cover + 7pp + 8b

This unprecedented commitment to child health and survival has become a phenomenal success -- beyond any of our wildest dreams.

"PolioPlus" - A Dream Come True.

It has been said that "only a dreamer can change a dream." Yet, while many have dreamt of ending the nightmare of polio for hundreds of thousands of children each year, nobody had demonstrated Rotary's ability to make that dream a reality -- the genius to conceive a workable action plan; the awesome worldwide network involving some 24,000 Rotary clubs to execute the plan; and the unprecedented commitment from so many of your million members to assure its success.

Our shared dream is fast becoming a reality. Globally, countless children are reaping the harvest of your commitment. Look at what already has been accomplished:

First, funding. When Rotary International set out to raise \$120 million for "PolioPlus" within five years, most of us thought that goal might have been amounted to shooting for the moon. Rotary, however, proved that goal to be most and, instead, reached for the stars raising a staggering \$240 million within two years!

It comes as no surprise that the 1,400 members of the 30 Hong Kong chapters surpassed your targets for Polio-Plus with pledges approaching a half a million dollars -- that amounted to some \$300 raised per member. Surely, this local achievement reflects the superb leadership of your committee chairman, Ira Kaye, and treasurer Colvin Brown.

Second, as to distribution, worldwide, \$80 million in "polioplus" grants have already been distributed to programs in 70 countries. Soon this will increase to 90 countries, covering 425 million children!

Remarkably, vaccine purchases increased 4-fold in only two years from \$4 million in 1986-87 to over \$16 million in 1987-88. More than one and a quarter million dollars every month is now being dedicated to purchasing vaccine. These expenditures represent 92% of "PolioPlus" funds.

Remaining funds are helping to provide cold chain equipment and promote social mobilization efforts.

PolioPlus - A Miracle in Sight

Thirdly, as to results, this program already has had a profound impact on the health of hundreds of thousands of children, globally. In fact, the evidence suggests that we are on the threshold of a miracle -- the beginning of the era of the eradication of polio.

In 1988, for the first time in history, more cases of polio were prevented than occurred.

Some 229,000 cases of polio and 23,000 deaths from polio were recorded, globally. But, as a result of immunizations, 231,000 cases were prevented!

In many countries, coverage has doubled or trebled in a six-month period thorough national vaccination days involving tens of thousands of volunteers, many of them Rotarians.

To assure global eradication, we need continued vigilance to attain high vaccination levels for at least five years. We also remain concerned about high drop-out rates in sub-Saharan Africa. Many children receiving their first dose of polio vaccine are failing to return for second and third doses. Although worldwide drop-out rates have fallen 25% in the last five years, in some dozen countries drop-out rates still exceed 50%. Overcoming this problem requires even more attention to effective social mobilization.

China's program for polio eradication is progressing. Achieving UCI last year, and setting 1990 as the goal for UCI in remote areas, has created a solid foundation for eliminating polio in China by 1992. It is remarkable that China has achieved a 95 % immunization rate for Polio and that 93.5% of China's counties reported no polio cases in 1988. We must hope that recent events do not undermine the steady progress that has been made in protecting children, or slow the strengthening of the infrastructure necessary to sustain this progress, such as the polio vaccine plant that Rotary has supported.

"PolioPlus" -- a lesson in what is doable.

Were it not for your immediate and dramatic success, the 166 nations of the World Health Assembly would never have taken the historic decision, last year, to target the eradication of polio by the end of this millennium.

But our vision at UNICEF is even more far reaching. If in only a decade the number of infants receiving three doses of oral polio vaccine has increased from from 5% to 60%, surely the world can also make dramatic progress in other areas of child survival with known, low-cost measures of prevention.

It is feasible to reach many parents of the 8,000 children who die each day for lack of 50 cents worth of vaccine for the other five leading diseases -- the "Plus" in "PolioPlus." And it is feasible to reach another 8,000 who die daily from dehydration associated with diarrhoeal diseases because they lack oral rehydration salts -- the simple, 10 cent solution of sugar and salt to mix with water.

If our collective capacity to save lives were not so great, then perhaps it would not be so obscene for the affluent world to clean its hands of the desperately needy children of the developing world.

If the communications revolution were not bringing to the television sets in our living rooms and onto the pages of our newspapers pictures of dying children, then perhaps it would not be so obscene for the affluent world to stand watch on the bridge without dispatching its flotilla of lifeboats.

But our anguish is deepened precisely because we are confronted almost daily with evidence that nearly half of the 40,000 child deaths daily are from causes for which we do have low-cost methods of prevention.

It is unconscionable not to translate our moral outrage into action -- especially when relatively little effort will make such a life-or-death difference for vast numbers of the world's children.

We can dedicate ourselves to achieving the UNICEF and World Health Organization joint strategies for the 1990's, including:

- * halving infant, child and maternal mortality rates;
- * eliminating severe malnutrition and reducing moderate malnutrition;
- * universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation;
- * universal primary education; and more.

By the end of the century, if we succeed only in the first goal -- halving under-5 mortality rates -- and it is feasible, we will succeed in saving the lives of some 100 million children and save 100 million more from crippling childhood disabilities.

"New Overtures -- From the grass-roots up; From the most powerful down."

To achieve these goals, part of the solution requires making today's knowledge about basic health care available to all parents -- especially those who have remained unreachable until now. It requires more effectively communicating vital information about birth spacing, pre-natal care, breast feeding, controlling diarrhoea, common child illnesses, sanitation growth monitoring and more.

To accelerate and broaden our efforts toward achieving these goals, last month in Paris, UNICEF, in partnership with UNESCO the World Health Organization and one-hundred international non-profit organizations, launched a major global initiative to promote primary health care. We call it "Facts For Life".

It seemed fitting that the launching by the U.N. agencies came at the International Congress of Pediatricians in Paris. With more than 4,000 in attendance, our message was that to achieve a revolution in child survival and well-being, health knowledge must no longer remain the sole domain of the medical community.

Health is everybody's business. Having the basic "Facts For Life" is every parent's right. To reach them, the promotion of basic health messages must become the responsibility of all communicators in society.

Another part of the solution is conveying that it becomes good politics for government to invest in child survival and development programs. In the past several years, we have seen new evidence of enlightenment in this area, at the highest levels of governments.

For the first time, the subject of children is being taken up on by world leaders at their summits in every region. These include the Heads of the South Asian countries at the SAARC summit; the Heads of the seven Central American nations; the Heads of the African States at the OAU Summit just last week, for the third consecutive year; 500 Parliamentarians from 98 countries at the recent Inter-Parliamentary Union summit in Budapest; the Reagan-Gorbachev Moscow Summit; and the recent Summit of the 7 industrial powers in Paris.

Now, it has even been reasonable to discuss the possibility as, indeed, Governments are now seriously discussing, of a global summit dedicated exclusively to children -- to their urgent needs and to the historic opportunities we have today to dramatically improve their survival, protection and development. The number of governments officially on record in support of the Summit proposal is 80 -- virtually half of the total membership of the United Nations.

Rotary means business about children.

Beyond government, the one million members of Rotary International understand as well as anybody, that the health and development of children also is the business of business.

If I may paraphrase the former CEO of Proctor and Gamble, Owen Butler, "whether you are ruled by the head or the heart these (child survival and development) programs ought to appeal to you."

More than most business leaders, Rotarians have long seemed to echo the sentiments of Mr. Butler.

You understand as well as anybody that securing the economic and political destiny of a nation requires investing in the destiny of its youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

And, perhaps each one of you in this room, the Rotarians in Hong Kong, understand more than most business people the primal connections between leading child health indicators and leading economic indicators -- between rates of population growth, infant and child mortality, low-birthweights, hunger, malnutrition and illiteracy and rates of growth in gross national product, inflation, national debt, government revenues and corporate profitability.

With among the lowest infant and child mortality rates in the world, and among the highest rates of primary school enrolments, literacy and life expectancy, the people of Hong Kong have demonstrated, brilliantly, that only through a commitment to improving the human condition, society-wide, can a nation hope to achieve true prosperity.

UNICEF Means Business About Business.

Similarly, UNICEF understands the crucial importance of a healthy business environment, regionally and globally, for promoting the survival and well-being of children.

We remain a leading advocate of development with a human face, and environmentally and economically sustainable economic growth. We understand that every job each of you creates that pays a fair wage, enables a mother or father to better provide for her or his children. That the jobs which you create today often represent the hope for children tomorrow.

With increasingly scarce resources and an increasingly degraded environment, the creativity, resourcefulness and sensitivity of business leaders is more vital than ever to helping assure continuing improvements in the health and development of the world's neediest citizens and nations.

Together -- and the reason the partnership between UNICEF and Rotary International remains so special and productive -- is because our alliance represents a recognition that the choice need not be between people or profits. The community must work together better than they ever have before for the collective welfare of all members -- working with increasing vitality toward a mutually respecting, supporting, sharing, sustainable family of humankind.

That philosophy represents the essence of our steadily growing Grand Alliance for Children. And the beauty of this moment in history -- a moment when we have witnessed the breakout of peace in so many regions long ravaged by conflict; when the flames of democracy have been rekindled on every continent -- and those flames can never be extinguished; and when for the first time since Hiroshima and Nagasaki the superpowers are beginning to talk about consolidating a new climate of cooperation, rather than accelerating confrontation -- the beauty of this unprecedented moment in history is the unprecedented opportunity it presents for making dramatic new progress for children.

As one writer once observed, "children know no enemies." And as former antagonists begin to common ground through children, surely that foundation can readily be extended into every other sector -- economic, social, environmental and, even, military.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

So it also comes with fortuitous timing that this fall the nations of the world will debate in the General Assembly, and I expect adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

First proposed by Poland in 1979, during the International Year of the Child, the Convention has been a decade in the making. It promises to be one of the landmark documents in the history of human rights -- comparable in stature to the French Declaration on the Rights of Man, the United States Bill of Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Convention.

For the first time, the world will recognize that children are children everywhere -- in every region, on every continent. For the first time, all nations will be expressing solidarity in recognizing the comprehensive rights of every child to survival, protection and development -- physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

It comes as no surprise that the Rotarians of Hong Kong have taken the initiative to begin considering how the Convention applies to the local situation for children -- and begun considering how to effectively implement provisions of the Convention.

Many countries and cities have already made changes in their laws to incorporate provisions codified in the convention. As Hong Kong looks to its future and prepares for 1997, the Convention can become an indispensable tool for this community to define the standards for how its children are to be treated in the coming decade and into the 21st century.

Just as importantly, what you accomplish here can serve as a historic model for other countries to follow throughout Asia and the Pacific.

Through the Convention, you have the unprecedented opportunity to influence the course of history throughout this region. To set a new high standard and affirm a new ethos that values the basic rights of every child to life, health, protection, to develop to his or her full potential and to live in dignity.

Thank you again for your commitment. And thank you for having me.