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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the  
State of the World's Children Launch

12 December 1989



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State of the Worlds Children Launch, 12 December 1989

(8 Minutes)

This year State of the World's Children Report is set in the dawning of 1990s as a decade of hope and possibilities. Major changes are in progress in Eastern Europe and in many other parts of the world. But it notes that as our hopes are raised on one front the situation on another needs urgent attention.

The greatest single stain on our civilization today is the fact that 40.000 children are dying every day from diseases that could have been largely prevented.

This is not a threatened crisis or an impending tragedy - it is an actual tragedy. It is happening today.

The good news is that there has clearly never been a better time to end the shame of child deaths on this scale. The know-how and the technology is there.

This years State of the Worlds Children shows how the lives of 3 million children a year have already been saved - 9000 a day - by low cost strategies such as immunization and oral rehydration therapy which have been put into action in the course of the 1980s. There are also in the world today one and a half million children who are growing up normally throughout the developing world who would have been crippled for life were it not for the low cost polio immunization which they received.

UNICEF argues that in the 1990s this effort should be extended to all the world's children - so that hardly any child will die for lack of one dollar's worth of vaccine or 10 cents worth of oral rehydration salts or one dollar's worth of antibiotics - as more than 7 million children died last year, including 3 million from lack of vaccination, 2 1/2 million from lack of oral rehydration and more that 2 million from pneumonia.

The successes of the last decade show that the job can be done if the modest financial resources and the will to do it are there. The financial cost of preventing most children deaths and most child malnutrition would be in the region of \$2-3 billion a year - equal to just one days military spending.

There are now clear signs that the proportion of the worlds resources which are devoted to armaments have peaked and begun to fall. For 50 years, from 1939 to 1989, our world has been preoccupied by war or confrontation. If, as now seems possible, the world were to emerge from that preoccupation with war and confrontation, then new vistas of human progress open up.

There would be no shortage of new challenges. But UNICEF's central position for the 1990s is that as the world moves away from a preoccupation with confrontation, it should move towards a preoccupation with human potential, and that potential begins with children.

The moral case is an obvious one. But there is also an overwhelming practical argument for giving children first call on our concerns and capacities. Protecting the mental and physical well-being of the one and a half billion children who will be born in the 1990s is the greatest investment the world can make towards its future economic prosperity, political stability, and environmental integrity.

I say this because malnutrition means poor physical and mental growth and the perpetuation of poverty from one generation to the next; high child death rates mean high birth rates and rapid population growth; lack of education precludes people from contributing fully to or benefitting fully from, the development of their communities and their nations; hopelessness and the denial of opportunity erodes self-respect and sows the seeds of almost insoluble social problems for future generations; entrenched injustices provoke an instability and violence which often takes on a life of its own, and, finally, the extremes of deprivation preclude environmental sensitivity, forcing millions to over-exploit their surroundings in the name of survival.

The Report calls for the basic protection of the lives and normal growth of children to have first call on the resources and capacity of all societies to ensure maternal and child nutrition and health care at all times, good and bad. That is what the United Kingdom did in 1939 at the start of World War II, when half of Britain's GNP "marched off to war". Maternal and child health, as a result, was better at the end of World War II than at the start.

But money alone cannot solve the problem. The experience of the last decade has shown that it takes sustained political commitment - at the highest levels and in every community - to take on this challenge and to see it through by mobilizing the support of different sectors of society -- the media, school teachers, the religious structures, non-governmental organizations and the commercial sector.

That is why UNICEF has proposed the first ever World Summit for Children -- at which Presidents and Prime Ministers from countries throughout the world would examine the extraordinary opportunities now available for protecting children -- and commit themselves to personally lead the governmental and voluntary efforts to turn these opportunities into realities. Local and national leadership groups could meet at the same time on the same children issues.

The Secretary General of the United Nations and over 100 governments of the world have now endorsed this proposal for a World Summit for Children. This has prompted six countries to take the lead in organizing plans for a World Summit to be held next September at the UN Headquarters in New York with UNICEF to serve as the Secretariat. A special session of the UNICEF Executive Board has been called for 18 December to act on this matter.

We believe also, that such a summit would be a major boost to accelerating the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UNGA on November 20th, and to hastening worldwide acceptance of the principles embodied in that historic document - helping to make it a standard below which any nation will be ashamed to fall.

Lastly, in commending this year's State of the World's Children Report to you, I would like to add that the problem of the developing world's debt still weighs almost as heavily as ever on the world's children. It has meant deep cuts in spending on health and education. And it is depriving millions of young people of the right to grow normally in mind and body - and to go to school.

Together military spending and debt servicing are now claiming almost half - more than \$300 billion annually - of all government expenditure in the developing world as a whole. That is a terrible record to have reached.

Debt servicing and military expenditure are two great brakes binding on the wheels of progress for the majority of mankind. If those brakes could be released, even partially, and national leadership strengthened in this direction, then it would now be possible to re-accelerate real human progress. And to sum up that possibility in one concluding fact, may I say that it would take only about 5 per cent of today's military expenditure, worldwide, to meet the most basic needs of all mankind for food, water, health care and education - to overcome the worst aspects of poverty - by the end of the 20th century.

That is the broad vision which beckons. At the center of that vision, and at the center of this year's State of the World's Children Report, is the belief that the 1990s could and should be the decade for doing the obvious, a decade in which the mass deaths and mass malnutrition of the world's children are consigned to history. This year's State of the World's Children Report is written, and commended to you, in support of that vision of a "first call" for our children.