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Foreword by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to
Agenda for Change

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Absolute poverty, rapid population growth, and environmental degradation are wreaking havoc throughout much of the world today. All too often, these problems have been addressed separately -- when they have been addressed at all -- with limited resources and, not surprisingly, limited impact. In fact, they have become so inter-related, so mutually-reinforcing, that approaching these problems separately risks underestimating the severity of the crisis they -- taken together -- represent.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was a genuine landmark in history inasmuch as it focused the world's attention on the relationships between these burning issues, and on the need to address them in holistic fashion. World leaders from 179 countries, along with representatives from thousands of non-governmental organizations, scientific and business communities, as well as international agencies, debated the issues, found an unprecedented degree of consensus, and committed themselves to an agenda for comprehensive change.

Agenda 21 provides a dynamic blueprint for action to achieve such change. If we are to convert to a way of life that preserves rather than destroys the earth, it argues, we must put the brakes on the wasteful, unsustainable, polluting and high consumption life-styles that characterize the industrialized world, and at the same time overcome the scourge of poverty, which fuels overpopulation and environmental destruction in the developing countries, while laying waste to vast human potential.

We at UNICEF were most gratified when the world leaders in Rio included, in Agenda 21, all of the goals for the year 2000 that had been set at the 1990 World Summit for Children, the first global summit gathering ever held. They did so in recognition of the fact that pursuing today's low-cost opportunities to protect the health, nutrition, and education of women and children in the developing world is one of the most immediately available and affordable ways of weakening the grip of poverty, population growth, and environmental deterioration.

Agenda 21 recognizes the need for Primary Environmental Care, an integrated, community-based approach aimed at meeting basic needs through empowerment of people and protection and optimal use of the natural resources on which people's livelihood directly depends. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Rio action plan also stresses the importance of environmental education and active participation by children and youth in the movement for sustainable development.

Children are the future of planet Earth. We must preserve our planet in order to nurture our children; equally, we must nurture our children better, if we are to preserve our planet.

We are grateful that the Centre for our Common Future has taken the initiative to condense the more than 700 pages of Agenda 21 into a 70-page, plain language text, while maintaining the essence as well as the flavour of the original. This popular version will help spread the message and garner support for the mission to which we all must be committed, individually as well as collectively, if there is to be a better tomorrow.

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