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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Sixth Mexican NPA Follow-up and Evaluation Meeting

Mexico City, Mexico
28 February 1994

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Since last June, I have had the privilege of meeting with more than 50 heads of state or government from all parts of the world. The main topic of discussion -- I don't really have to tell you -- has been how to accelerate progress for children, how to get their societies to move faster and more efficiently toward the goals they have set for children. Actually, considerable progress is being made and most of the leaders I meet are supportive, genuinely enthusiastic, about the efforts being made for children.

But I usually have to find a tactful way of suggesting that being supportive is not enough; they need to get more **personally** involved, more **visibly** and **publicly** involved, in order to get things really moving. I tell them there is nothing like personal, visible presidential leadership for lighting a fire under the bureaucracy and getting the different ministries working together for children. Personal, visible presidential leadership is also imperative if civic society and the media are to mobilize in pursuit of social goals.

And in almost every one of these discussions with heads of state and government, I cite the example of Mexico -- how President Salinas personally leads these NPA follow-up and evaluation meetings on a regular basis, with key ministers and the media present. And, I might add, with UNICEF gratefully present. And I tell them that this has contributed greatly to the remarkable progress that Mexico has made in recent years.

So it is really wonderful to be back with President Salinas for another of these exemplary meetings -- the sixth since the first follow-up to the World Summit for Children in November 1990. I thank you for inviting me, and for giving me more things to tell the world about after I leave.

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The progress you have made is truly impressive. This is reflected even in the format of the document you have prepared for this meeting. Instead of reviewing progress sector by sector, as you have done in the past, you are now using the National Programme of Action as a framework to measure progress toward meeting your concrete, time-bound goals, all of which involve multi-sectoral collaboration. This represents a fundamental shift of mindset, a more holistic approach to social policy.

Since the last evaluation meeting, you have made rapid progress in decentralizing the National Programme of Action; I understand that almost every State, and many of the key cities, now have their own Programme of Action. This is a major achievement. Experience shows that not everything can be done from above or from the centre, even with the greatest political will in the world; there must be real initiative, genuine participation and serious accountability all along the chain of responsibility, right down to the community level which is where, after all, the people and their needs are. Decentralization of NPAs is proceeding apace in many countries, including China and India, I am happy to report, but Mexico is ahead of the pack.

This puts you in an excellent position to address a problem that is critical not only here in Mexico, but in virtually all countries, developing and industrial alike. It is the problem of reaching those who are bypassed by progress -- the very poor, minority groups, indigenous peoples, villages that are hard to reach, settlements that are widely scattered over vast hinterlands or crowded on urban peripheries. Large disparities often lurk behind the most impressive national averages.

Looking at the U.S. infant mortality rate, for example, tells us nothing about the plight of Black babies, who are dying at twice the rate of their white sisters and brothers, or of Washington D.C., where despite above-average per capita GNP infants die at twice the national rate. The contrast between the human indicators for Brazil's impoverished northeast and that country's national averages tells a similar story. We simply must disaggregate our data on human development and work to narrow such unacceptable disparities. We cannot afford to be like the man who went to sleep with his feet in the oven and his head in the refrigerator, saying "On average I feel alright".

What is so encouraging is the remarkable pace of overall progress for children in Mexico in recent years. You have already achieved a number of your 1995 goals: in immunization coverage, polio eradication, use of oral rehydration therapy, basic education, water and sanitation, and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And you seem to be well on track to reach the remaining targets by 1995: those for neonatal tetanus, measles, iodine and vitamin A deficiencies, and extension of the Baby and Mother Friendly Hospital movement.

These and other achievements have enabled Mexico to lower its registered infant mortality rate from 24.1 deaths per thousand live births in 1990, to 18.8 deaths per thousand births in 1992. Mexico is keeping the promise of the World Summit for Children and is way ahead of most other countries in achievement of the mid-decade goals.

Looking ahead, I would identify three areas that I believe deserve special attention:

* **First, extending quality health services to low coverage areas.** As you build and extend your health infrastructure, the National Health Week, now supported by 45 countries, is an excellent vehicle for expanding coverage and reaching the unreached. You have put together an excellent integrated package of interventions: immunization, intensive promotion of ORT, micronutrient supplementation, and information on early detection and case management of pneumonia and diarrhoea. You now have in your hands a technically sound, financially feasible, socially acceptable means of accelerating reduction of infant mortality in high risk areas through a special effort.

* **Second, in education, the challenge will be to improve the quality of learning and narrow persistent disparities.** In some areas, teaching standards leave much to be desired, while others remain without adequate primary schools, and adult illiteracy rates are still high, especially among women.

* **Third, the challenge in the water and sanitation sector is to ensure coverage** by the year 2000 in the many remote, hard-to-reach or widely dispersed rural settlements and villages that still do not have these services.

Inasmuch as Mexico has already made remarkable progress in implementing its NPA, and has already achieved a number of important mid-decade goals ahead of schedule, it should be possible to place special emphasis on reaching the unreached, the poorest of the urban and rural poor, and in particular, the indigenous peoples. On the technical side, this will require better data telling us where needs are the greatest. In a large country like Mexico with 121,000 municipalities and villages -- many of them mere settlements of fewer than 500 people -- just identifying the needy and their needs represents a major challenge. But it is a challenge that every developing country faces, and Mexico is in a better position than most to address it successfully. As we note in this year's State of the World's Children report, tackling the problem of poverty is not merely a question of altruism, it is increasingly a matter of self-preservation for all, rich and poor alike.

It will also be important to begin to reflect on ways to consolidate and sustain the achievements you have already made, in order to ensure steady progress to the year 2000 and beyond. I would make two suggestions:

* First, maintain the high priority you have given in recent years to social and human development. Mexico's social spending has gone from 6.1 per cent of GNP in 1989 to 9.7 per cent in 1993. Over the past five years, in real terms, education spending grew almost 90 per cent, health 79 per cent, and 65 per cent in ecology, urban development and safe water supply. The challenge will be to maintain high levels of social investment -- the payoff in the medium- and long-term will be great, as we have seen in the East Asian economies.

* Second, encourage the State governments and priority municipalities to strengthen and accelerate the implementation of their programmes for children. The governors and mayors should take a leaf from your book, Mr. President, and hold regular follow-up and evaluation meetings such as this one. The active participation of the community, of all sectors of the population, the private sector, NGOs and civic groups, will be the key to the success of the programmes of action.

I am greatly encouraged by what is happening here in Mexico. I have just witnessed the country's salt producers pledging to ensure that all salt will soon be properly iodized, to prevent iodine deficiencies that stunt the physical and mental development of children. And I have just been with representatives of the Federation of Public Organizations for the Defense and Protection of Human Rights, who have pledged to monitor the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and who will deploy 33 child rights' ombudsmen throughout the country. These are excellent, promising initiatives from the non-governmental sector that complement and reinforce government action.

Before closing, I would like to warmly greet the ministers of health and other officials from 8 countries who are here to observe Mexico's second National Health Week, as part of commemorations of the 25th anniversary of the discovery of ORT. In spite of much progress made to date, the countries represented here today account for half of all child deaths due to diarrhoeal dehydration, and I am certain you will take home with you important lessons from Mexico. Last October, during Mexico's first National Health Week, health ministers and officials from 37 countries were here, and they issued a pledge to accelerate child mortality reduction in the framework of their NPAs. This distinguished group of government representatives might consider doing the same, as a signal that the momentum for children continues.

Finally, I want to share with you something Martin Luther King Jr. used to tell his civil rights audiences in the 1960s, which also describes where our global children's movement is today: "We're not yet where we want to be," he'd say, "And we're not where we're going to be. But we sure are a long way from where we were!"

Thank you, President Salinas; thank you Dr. Kumate; thank you Mexico, for helping to get us a long way from where we were and that much closer to where we want to be!