


File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1994-0022

Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
delivered on his Behalf by
Mr. Stephen Lewis
at the
50th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

“What it Means to be Human:
the Challenge of Respecting Children's Rights in the 1990s”

Geneva, Switzerland
8 March 1994

	UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label
	RcE0006HZZ
Item #	CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02455
ExR/Code:	CF/EXD/SP/1994-0022
Fiftieth [50th] Session of the UN Commission on Human Rig	
Date Label Printed 24-Sep-2002	

cover + 6pp + Øb



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1994-0022

Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund
Delivered on his Behalf by
Mr. Stephen Lewis
at the
50th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights
Geneva - 8 March 1994

**"What it Means to be Human:
the Challenge of Respecting Children's Rights in the 1990s"**

I am delighted and honoured to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of Mr. James P. Grant, the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund. Mr. Grant deeply regrets not being able to make this statement in person due to other pressing obligations in New York. He asked me to thank Mr. Ibrahima Fall, Director of the Centre for Human Rights, for the kind invitation to address the Commission. I would also like to thank Mr. Fall for his generous comments on the excellent co-operation between UNICEF and the Centre.

Indeed, we are pleased to have completed our third joint plan of work with the Centre. The focus of our co-operation is providing support to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its crucial role as monitor of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna last June was a landmark not only for the future of human rights in general, but also for children's rights. It reaffirmed the full range and indivisibility of children's rights, as reflected in the Conference's call for universal ratification of the Convention and universal signature of the Declaration and Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children.

I am happy to report that there has been significant progress on both counts. First, the Convention on the Rights of the Child has already been embraced by more States than any other human rights treaty in history. One hundred and fifty-five countries have ratified the Convention to date; only 35 have yet to do so -- although several have ratified at the national level and will soon deposit the relevant formal documents with the United Nations.

FINAL

cover + 6pp + 0b

We are hopeful that the goal of universal ratification will be reached by the end of 1995, making the Convention the first law of all humankind. Achievement of this goal would be a most fitting gift to the United Nations on its 50th anniversary. It would also send an unmistakable signal to the World Summit for Social Development that the basic needs of each and every individual child must be treated as inalienable rights, as priorities for each and every society and each and every family.

Meeting children's basic needs will help accelerate solutions to the main problems that vex and threaten humankind on the threshold of the 21st century -- the problems of poverty, overpopulation, and environmental degradation that feed off of one another in a downward spiral that brings instability and strife in its wake. We have discovered an extraordinary lever for global progress, and its name is children. No global social agenda will meet the test of time if it does not recognize this.

Second, a total of 156 heads of state and government have signed the World Summit for Children Declaration and Plan of Action. No other document in history has been signed by so many leaders. It commits its signatories to radically improving the lives of children by the year 2000, through the achievement of some 20 measurable health, nutrition and education goals. We are most gratified that the Committee on the Rights of the Child has decided to use the World Summit goals and timetable as a yardstick for measuring national compliance with many of those provisions of the Convention relating to children's social and economic rights.

For the first time in history, the world is in the process of agreeing on minimum standards for nurturing the young.

Lest you think we are making too much of papers and promises, let me assure you that we are already seeing concrete results in the field. Some 120 countries have issued or drafted detailed National Programmes of Action for reaching mid-decade and year 2000 goals for children and women. And, as we explain at length in the 1994 State of the World's Children report, and our new annual statistical publication, Progress of Nations, many of the traditional enemies of children are now on the run -- vaccine-preventable diseases, malnutrition, ignorance, among others.

The Child Survival and Development Revolution has saved more than 20 million young lives since its inception in the early 1980s, and it is now averting the deaths of approximately four million children per year. Prospects have never been better for accelerating this momentum. Thus, the heads of state and government of most developing countries have agreed to intermediate, mid-decade goals to be reached by end 1995. Their achievement would mean saving an additional 2 million child lives annually, as well as the virtual elimination of the greatest cause of preventable mental retardation -- iodine deficiency -- and of one of the two principal causes of blindness among children -- vitamin A deficiency.

The task ahead remains formidable -- but a good start has been made. For the first time ever, there is a concerted, global effort underway for the world's children, with common goals and proven, low-cost strategies.

Permit me to comment on a number of recent developments that have had an impact on children's rights:

* First, UNICEF welcomes the establishment of the post of **High Commissioner for Human Rights** and we congratulate Mr. Jose Ayala Lasso on his appointment. We pledge our full support to the Commissioner's efforts to carry out the third great mandate of the United Nations Charter. We urge him to give all due attention to children's rights to protection under the law, and to foster the recognition of their essential needs as fundamental human rights. In particular, we must seek improvement of the status and well-being of girls and women, whose rights are absolutely central to all human rights -- as clearly articulated at the Vienna conference last June.

* Second, UNICEF welcomes the decision by the General Assembly to implement the proposal from the Committee on the Rights of the Child to undertake a **comprehensive study of the impact of armed conflict on children**. UNICEF looks forward to working closely with the expert chosen to prepare this important study in consultation with the Centre for Human Rights and other relevant organs/agencies of the UN system.

Modern wars have taken a terrible toll among children and other civilians; in recent conflicts, children seem to have become targets of choice, in violation of the most basic norms of law and human decency. Girls and women are often the preferred targets of violence, with rape as a particularly vicious weapon of war. Surely the international community can find ways to provide children and women with greater protection and relief amidst the wars that victimize and traumatize them.

Third, and related to this last point, is the issue of **anti-personnel landmines**. We applaud the General Assembly's approval of four resolutions explicitly dealing with this important subject, one of which calls for a moratorium on the export of landmines. Given the cruel and inhuman intention of these weapons and their growing cost in human and economic terms -- and the increasing toll they are taking among children -- I would like to add my voice to that of the International Committee of the Red Cross and urge the international community to go one critical step further and adopt a **total ban on the production, use, stockpiling, as well as the sale and export of anti-personnel landmines**. For UNICEF, this cause has a very particular force, inasmuch as the presence of landmines violates many of the fundamental provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF looks forward to being granted status in the process

leading to the review conference of the Inhumane Weapons Convention, and we will participate vigorously.

* Fourth, **economic exploitation and sexual exploitation of children** continue to demand our attention. Frankly, the trends are quite discouraging, with more and more children becoming involved in hazardous work and prostitution. The Committee on the Rights of the Child held a consultation last year on economic exploitation and heard harrowing accounts from international agencies and NGOs. UNICEF is undertaking a study to develop a better understanding of the conditions under which children are channeled into the work force and away from schooling. We know that there are more than 100 million school-aged children who are not in school -- 60 per cent of them girls. **Society must mobilize to protect children from abuse and neglect**, while using every means available to provide them with learning opportunities. The sexual exploitation of children is an issue calling out for concerted action. We welcome the illuminating work and disturbing findings of Mr. Vitit Muntarbhorn, Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and his many useful recommendations. UNICEF stands ready to contribute to the implementation of the strong resolution that seems likely to emerge from this session of the Commission.

* Lastly, UNICEF would like to flag a complex issue for which there may not be an immediate solution, but which deserves more thoughtful attention on the part of the international community. It concerns the **situation of children in countries affected by sanctions**. We recognize that sanctions are a necessary tool for international action, occupying the middle-ground between rhetorical resolutions and the use of armed force. Sanctions must, however, be applied in a manner in which children of poor families -- the most vulnerable and, I might add, the most innocent in a society -- do not suffer most cruelly.

Without renouncing the non-military mechanisms of international pressure wisely provided in the Charter, it should be possible to refine our existing tools -- or to develop others -- so that children are not major and unintended victims of particular sanctions. The ethical-legal environment in which we are operating must ensure that the situation of children under sanctions' regimes remains in the forefront of our concerns.

-Might we not require that any proposals for sanctions include a "child impact assessment", describing the expected impact of the proposed sanctions on children, and detailing the offsetting measures proposed to be taken?

As we urgently look for ways to better protect children caught up in wars, or who are economically or sexually exploited and abused, we must not -- we cannot -- forget the far larger number of

children who are victims of what UNICEF calls the "silent emergency". The violence they face is the violence of poverty, the daily assault by illness and malnutrition that take their victims one by one, out of sight of TV cameras and photographers' lenses, but adding up to an obscene body count of 35,000 every day, a quarter million every week, 13 million a year. This is the cruelest war, for we know how to save at least two-thirds of these lives at low cost with know-how and simple technologies that are readily available today. If we do not save them, we are capitulating to an enemy that has long since shown its weakness when our simple but highly effective tools of healing, nourishing and learning are vigorously applied. We must continually remind ourselves of this undeniable truth, and let it inform our discussions, debates and programmes on human rights, as well as our individual consciences.

I would like to conclude by enumerating several challenges which we believe must be faced by the international community and the UN system without delay:

* First, let us all work to ensure **universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child** by end 1995.

* Second, we must do all that we can to see that the spirit of the Convention and its provisions progressively work their way into policy and the legal codes and institutional life of nations, and the everyday culture of individuals, families and communities. **Both adults and children must be generally aware that children have rights.**

* Third, we must encourage States to submit **serious and detailed reports** to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, with significant input from NGOs.

* Fourth, we need to get **the entire UN system** on board. In addition to UNICEF, there are a number of other UN agencies and bodies that could also greatly assist the Committee on the Rights of the Child -- whose budget and staff are quite limited.

* Fifth, we must sharpen our tools for **monitoring and measuring implementation** of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The World Summit for Children Declaration and Plan of Action offer real-world guidelines for assessing compliance with a range of economic and social rights.

* Sixth, we must sharpen our ability to track and measure implementation of the rights of children to **protection and participation**, that do not easily lend themselves to quantifiable goals and for which our current data are quite weak.

* our seventh and final challenge: if we are serious about the rights of children and human rights in general, we must build

the ethical bridge to overcoming the readily-avoidable effects of poverty, such as preventable disease, illiteracy, malnutrition and lack of clean water and adequate sanitation over the balance of the decade. Since these are among the principal causes as well as the symptoms of poverty, we can lay the basis for overcoming poverty itself early in the next century.

The great American sociologist C. Wright Mills once remarked that "history is not yet done with its exploration... of what it means to be human." I happen to believe that we will never quite be done with our exploration of what it means to be human; but at the same time, I would suggest that we have reached a critical point in our expedition. We have the rare opportunity during this last decade of a century of holocausts and hiroshimas to make a quantum leap of human progress. Let us not allow it to slip through our fingers.

Once more, UNICEF warmly thanks the Commission for its continuous leadership and for this opportunity to share our views and concerns. We hope to return, as appropriate, to continue the dialogue.