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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Ministerial Meeting on Follow-up to the World Summit for Children
- Children and Social Policy in the Americas

Bogota, Colombia
5 April 1994

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Bogota - 5 April 1994

It is most fitting that this second ministerial meeting to discuss follow-up to the World Summit for Children is taking place in Colombia. It was here, in 1984, that the incipient Child Survival and Development Revolution launched by UNICEF got its first national-level test and the first breakthrough toward Universal Child Immunization was achieved, with a massive national mobilization involving all sectors of society. I want to thank the government of Colombia for hosting this important meeting, and to thank President Gaviria for being with us today. Your Excellency: you and the First Lady have shown genuine leadership in the cause of children's well-being, and I thank you on behalf of UNICEF and on behalf of the 150 million children of Latin America.

As you know, the first follow-up meeting in this region on the World Summit for Children took place in Mexico, in October 1992. It brought together ministers and senior officials from 19 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. This time, not only are there more countries of the region represented, but more are represented at ministerial level and above. In addition to our host, the President of Colombia, the Prime Minister of Dominica and the Vice-Presidents of Costa Rica, Dominican Republic and Honduras are here with us today. What's more, we have with us a representative of the United States -- making this a gathering of almost all of the Americas. It is an historic occasion, indeed, for you are all responsible for implementing your countries' NPAs, and are therefore in a position to greatly improve the lives of the children of the entire hemisphere. As co-sponsor of this meeting, UNICEF thanks all of you for coming and for helping to write what I am certain will be some of this decade's most exciting new pages.

With the economies of North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean becoming more inter-linked, and with more and more common problems spanning borders, this kind of meeting is more timely than ever. I know that you will agree that there needs to be far greater cooperation between all of the countries in this hemisphere in the social sphere. Self-interest and solidarity require it.

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Today I want to share with you UNICEF's thinking about a new social ethic that is beginning to gather momentum worldwide. It places human beings -- and particularly the poor -- at the centre of the development process, and gives children's basic needs a first call on society's concerns and resources. This region can be proud of the leading role it has played in the emergence of this new and revolutionary approach to solving many of the most critical problems of our time. Permit me to briefly sketch the global picture as it has evolved over the past few years.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its sweeping provisions that translate children's most essential needs into children's rights, entered into force in 1990 after ten long years of debate hampered by the East-West conflict. In the new atmosphere created by the end of the Cold War and the successes of the Child Survival and Development Revolution, the Convention has rapidly been embraced by more States than any other human rights treaty in history. One hundred and fifty-six countries have ratified the Convention to date; only 34 have yet to do so -- and 15 of these have already signed their intention to actively pursue ratification. 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.

The first truly global summit ever held -- bringing together leaders from North, South, East and West -- was convened in the name of children. The World Summit for Children not only attracted what was until then the largest number of heads of state and government ever to attend a summit meeting with a large majority of the heads from this hemisphere participating, but also produced a remarkably specific set of principles and an action plan for reaching 27 arguably doable goals by the year 2000 -- achievement of which would, in effect, overcome most of the worst aspects of absolute poverty for children. A total of 157 heads of state and government have now signed the World Summit Declaration and Plan of Action -- no other document in history has been signed by so many leaders. Moreover, 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 some such as Mexico, China and India have issued State, provincial and municipal plans of action as well.

The Human Rights Commission's 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 the 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. 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, legally-sanctioned discrimination and neglect, among others. The Child Survival and Development Revolution has saved more than 20 million young lives since its inception in the early 1980s. It is now averting the deaths of more than four million children per year.

Prospects have never been better for accelerating this momentum. Thus, most developing countries have agreed to intermediate, mid-decade goals to be reached by end 1995. These goals, with which all of you are already familiar, have been endorsed by the governing bodies of the World Health Organization and UNICEF, and the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, Gus Speth, has recently written to UN Resident Representatives throughout the world asking them to throw their weight behind country-level efforts to reach them. Their achievement would mean saving an additional 2 million child lives annually by 1996, 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.

We at UNICEF believe that the world is on the threshold of being able to make vastly greater progress on many longstanding issues than is generally recognized. I see some analogy here to what happened in the mid-1960s with regard to hunger in Asia. Some of you will recall the early 1960s gloom and doom scenarios of population growth in Asia outrunning food supply, leading to projections of massive famine, chaos and global instability in the last third of this century. But then, quite suddenly, within 4-5 years, there was the Green Revolution in Asia, extending from the Philippines to Turkey. In country after country, grain crops were doubled -- an historically unprecedented achievement.

Why then? The miracle wheat strains had been around for more than 10 years. But it was only by the mid-1960s that the surrounding environment became propitious for rapid expansion, for going to national scale. Only by then had fertilizer and pesticide use and controlled irrigation become widely practiced and readily available, thanks in large part to earlier aid programmes. And, equally important, the combination of Asian drought and increasing awareness of the population explosion created the political will at

the highest levels to drastically restructure price levels for grains and inputs, and to mobilize the several sectors of society required for success.

I would argue that we are in a similar position today on a much broader front -- encompassing basic education, primary health care, water supply and sanitation, family planning, gender equity, as well as food production -- covering a much wider geographical area, now including Latin America and Africa, as well as Asia. The mid-1990s are analogous to the mid-1960s in that concerns for the global environment, including overpopulation and for progress in meeting basic human needs in an increasingly democratic world, are now reaching a critical mass at a time when recent scientific and technological advances, including our revolutionary new capacity to communicate with and mobilize large numbers of people, now enable national and world leaders to produce dramatic results when these various resources are combined and problems are addressed in a multisectoral fashion. The end of the Cold War, combined with the shift toward democratic and open market systems in so much of the world, have set the political stage for global cooperation to achieve a quantum leap of human progress.

We at UNICEF argue that 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, population, and environmental degradation that feed off of one another in a downward spiral (we call it the "PPE spiral") that brings instability and strife in its wake. **We believe that an extraordinary lever for global progress has been found, and its name is children.**

If we can overcome the worst manifestations of poverty early in the lives of young children we'd be going a long way toward eradicating poverty itself, because frequent illness, malnutrition, poor growth, and illiteracy are not only symptoms, but also some of the most fundamental causes of poverty. Accomplishing this, we could anticipate -- from the recent population experiences of such diverse societies as Sri Lanka, Kerala, Costa Rica, China and the Asian NICS -- a far greater reduction in the rate of population growth than most now believe possible, for parents who are confident their first born children will survive and have a basic education tend overwhelmingly to have much smaller families. Slowing population growth would in turn greatly reduce stress on school systems, jobs and the environment, easing demand for scarce land and natural resources.

By overcoming many of poverty's worst manifestations and undermining some of its major causes, we'd also be giving a major boost to the fragile new democracies that desperately need to provide some early measure of tangible improvement in the lives of the bottom half of their societies in order to survive. And we know from the experience of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and the

other Asian NICS that it would accelerate economic growth. Healthy and well-educated youth are the backbone of productive workforces and economies that can compete in the global marketplace.

In recognition of these linkages I have just described, all the goals for children set by the World Summit for Children were later endorsed by the Earth Summit and incorporated into Agenda 21. UNICEF believes that the goals for women and children constitute the most immediately doable and affordable core of Agenda 21, and that their speedy achievement would give a major boost to sustainable human development.

I am happy to note that much of the momentum of recent global progress for children is coming from Latin America. Colombia's pioneering national immunization campaign in 1984... the annual "Days of Tranquility" in El Salvador, beginning in 1985, during which the civil war stopped so that children could be immunized... the joint proclamation of immunization days in 1986 by the presidents of the seven Central American countries -- these and other initiatives set an example for similar actions in many parts of the world, leading to the achievement in 1990 of Universal Child Immunization. And it was in great measure the world scale success of immunization that gave the international community the impetus to approve the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the confidence to hold the World Summit for Children in 1990.

President Salinas of Mexico was one of the six presidents who convened the Summit, and more heads of state participated from Latin America than from any other region of the world. With the exception of Haiti and the United States, all the countries of the hemisphere have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Virtually all have signed the Declaration and Plan of Action adopted at the World Summit for Children. National Programmes of Action (NPAs) for children have been issued in almost every country; that means that over 95 per cent of the region's children are now covered by government plans to significantly improve their well-being by the end of the decade. Ecuador and Bolivia, with their national iodization of salt and related measures, are models for the global effort against iodine deficiency disorders.

This global leadership is reflected, moreover, in the high profile your heads of state and government have given to World Summit follow-up in the three historic Ibero-American summits that have been held to date -- the last of which adopted the important Fortaleza Document; and in the Central American presidents' decision to maintain a high degree of sub-regional coordination in efforts to implement their NPAs. The First Ladies of the region -- including, outstandingly, the First Lady of Colombia -- have come together on behalf of children and human development. The Latin American and Central American Parliaments have taken up the banner. The global movement of Mayors: Defenders of Children is growing by leaps and bounds in this part of the world. Just a few weeks ago,

on the eve of El Salvador's national elections, that country's seven presidential candidates came together to pledge cooperation in giving children's needs priority attention, regardless of the outcome of the vote.

Similar examples of the new attitude toward children and development abound throughout the hemisphere. At the White House launch of UNICEF's 1994 State of the World's Children report, in December, President Clinton said that "investing in the children of the world can be the most cost-effective way not only to relieve suffering, but to advance economies, to promote self-sufficiency, to promote democracy and to avert future conflicts." He called on Americans in private and public life to "join with leaders in developing nations to help ensure that we do make tangible progress," and concluded: "Let us today commit that our children and the world's children will figure large in our vision."

In this region, I would say the prospects for accelerating progress for children are good-to-excellent. After a decade of retrogression, economies are growing again, albeit unevenly and too slowly; following prolonged and bitter conflicts, peace agreements have held; with few exceptions, democracy is taking root and elections -- rather than coups or revolutions -- are now overwhelmingly accepted as the road to power and change.

There is broad consensus now that economic growth must be accompanied by equity, and that democracy requires effective decentralization and participation on the part of civil society. There is greater awareness of the need for social investment, as well as economic investment, to ensure the future prosperity and stability of your nations.

The greatest challenge you face, in this region which leads the world in maldistribution of wealth, is to rapidly and significantly narrow the disparities which mean suffering and lost opportunities for nearly half the population, as well as lower productivity for your economies. Those left behind by progress must be extended a helping hand; the unreached must be reached, and here I am thinking especially of indigenous groups who have suffered not only egregious neglect but longstanding discrimination.

But poverty has proven to be an elusive target, even in the most developed societies; and structural adjustment and macroeconomic stabilization have apparently either exacerbated poverty or not made much of a dent in it. So how do we get a handle on poverty, this scourge affecting almost 200 million human beings in Latin American and the Caribbean, and some 1.3 billion people worldwide? Where do we start?

It is clear that broad-based growth that creates jobs remains an essential way to help people escape poverty. But the experience of decades of development efforts shows that neither equity nor jobs flow automatically from growth. UNDP's Gus Speth has offered a splendid definition of sustainable human development that all of us might well consider adopting: He said: "Sustainable human development is development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; that empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It gives priority to the poor, enlarging their choices and opportunities, and provides for their participation in decisions affecting them. It is development that is pro-poor, pro-nature, pro-jobs, pro-women and pro-children."

As I mentioned before, we now have a package of low-cost tools that help us to "outsmart poverty", as it were, early in the lives of children by preventing some of its worst symptoms which are, at the same time, some of its most significant causes. Governments, NGOs and international agencies can help people and communities to help themselves, starting with children, without institutionalizing life-long dependency on outside support. Long-term safety nets can then be targeted to the most vulnerable.

Greater equality of opportunity to participate, rather than more aid of the welfare variety, is the most urgent need of the poor within countries and of the low-income states within the community of nations. This equity can be more efficient than inequity and "trickle down" in advancing growth in both rich and poor countries.

And this is why your NPAs are so important. These remarkable action plans can spearhead the development of a new kind of social policy that fuels both economic growth and social equity. As government officials responsible for the implementation of these plans, you are on the cutting edge of what is potentially the greatest change on the eve of the third millennium: the shift from emphasis primarily on economic growth to sustainable human development; the shift from people existing to serve the State and its elite, to the State existing to serve the individual and the community. Yours, therefore, is a momentous responsibility.

In implementing your NPAs, however, you are obviously not starting from zero; you have a solid, if uneven, momentum of progress to build on. Latin America's basic human indicators continued to improve or held their ground even in the darkest days of the 1980s -- the "lost decade" for development. If you were able to maintain progress then, when the surrounding environment was so adverse, there is every reason to believe you will be able to accelerate progress now, when overall conditions -- hard though they may be -- are much better and more supportive of your efforts than during the 1980s.

In closing, I would like to briefly offer a few specific proposals for your consideration. My colleague, Dr. Marta Mauras - Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean -- will be discussing them with you in more detail over the next two days.

* First, I want to emphasize the importance of achieving the **mid-decade goals** in every country by the end of 1995. These goals have been chosen because they are the most doable and affordable in the short run. Their achievement will mean saving hundreds of thousands of young lives and giving millions more a fighting chance for a decent life.

Success by 1995 in getting immunization levels up to 85 per cent in all countries; in seeing to it that all salt is iodized; in virtually eliminating vitamin A deficiency to prevent blindness and reduce childhood mortality, among other measures, will pave the way toward achievement of the more difficult year 2000 targets.

Special emphasis needs to be placed on getting ORT use up to 80 per cent to prevent the death of so many children from simple diarrhoea, and we need to go all-out to make all hospitals "baby-friendly" through stepped-up breastfeeding promotion and cutting off free supplies of breastmilk substitutes.

Many countries in the region have already achieved or surpassed one or more of the mid-decade goals -- Ecuador and Bolivia, for example, are already iodizing virtually all their salt -- and some are taking up additional, more complex challenges, such as Mexico's goal to reach 95 per cent immunization coverage by 1995.

In order to accelerate progress toward these goals, presidents and prime ministers will have to become personally involved; all sectors of government, as well as NGOs and the private sector, will need to work together to implement the NPA; the process will have to be greatly decentralized so that provincial and municipal authorities will be able to design action plans that make sense at the local level, with maximum community participation and initiative -- in short, the entire social fabric will need to be mobilized.

In doing so, you will not be alone. You will be able to count on more coordinated and efficient assistance from UNICEF, WHO/PAHO, UNDP and other relevant United Nations agencies and from a range of dynamic partners ranging from the Catholic church to Rotarians, from bilateral donors to NGOs of all kinds.

* Second, greater emphasis must be placed on improving the quality of **primary schools** where they exist, and on providing poor and marginalized groups with far greater access to basic education, literacy and life-skills training. Although primary school enrolment is generally high in the region, drop-out and repetition rates are inordinately high. Traditional curricula need to be made more relevant to the conditions in which children actually live, and new generations must be imbued with a strong sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens not only of a given country but of the global village.

* Third, **more funds** need to be made available to implement NPAs. This can be accomplished either through increased allocations to social sectors -- difficult but not impossible in this time of renewed growth -- or through restructuring of the social sector. As appropriate to each country's reality, funding priorities need to be shifted from high-tech hospitals to rural and peri-urban community health centres; from specialized higher education to primary schooling; from wasteful national food subsidies to nutrition support for carefully targeted groups; from high-cost urban household water and sanitation schemes to low-cost services for unserved populations in the countryside and urban slums. More funding is needed for family planning information and services.

UNICEF argues in favour of "20/20 vision" -- the allocation of at least 20 per cent of national budgets and of ODA to finance these and other areas of priority need. Half that much, on average, is being devoted to these areas at present. In this region, Chile and Mexico are showing the way, having made substantial increases in their budgets for these areas in recent years. Certainly more funds can be made available in many countries as unprofitable State enterprises are privatized and militaries are downsized.

* Fourth, now that the Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by all your countries, the focus must shift to **implementation and education**, so that children's rights are better understood and respected on a day to day basis -- in the home, in school, on the street, in the workplace, and in the media. There is far too much abuse and neglect of children, far too much violence and exploitation -- in all countries, developed and developing. And the voices of children and youth are not nearly as audible as they should be, and their participation in decisions that affect their lives needs to be taken far more seriously. The Convention provides us with excellent tools for making progress on this front.

* One last proposal: The **scope for hemispheric cooperation** in the area of children's rights and basic needs is growing as the economies of North, Central and South America, as well as of the Caribbean, become more and more inter-linked, and as more and more people move back and forth between North and South in increasing waves of migration and travel. I need not enumerate here the long list of problems relating to children that are common to the countries of the hemisphere, but it seems to me that there are more opportunities for cooperation in solving many of them than are currently being exploited. Among the possibilities that come to mind:

- 1) efforts to standardize immunizations and vaccination schedules so that children moving from one country to another are ensured proper and timely coverage;
- 2) cooperation to discourage use of harmful and unnecessary anti-diarrhoeals, so that messages reinforcing ORT use are reinforced throughout the hemisphere;
- 3) joint promotion and support of breastfeeding and the establishment of baby-friendly hospitals, to reinforce the re-emergence of the culture of breastfeeding;
- 4) hemispheric linkages to encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyles and sexually-responsible behaviour on the part of youth, to counter trends in both North and South toward teenage pregnancies, single parent families, and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Many more areas for cooperation could be cited, certainly, but I simply wanted to suggest here the possibility of an **Initiative for the Children of the Americas**, one that could place this hemisphere in the lead, globally speaking, in terms of North-South cooperation for children's well-being. And may I be so bold as to suggest that the hemispheric summit planned for next December in Miami might be an excellent opportunity for launching it?

Excellencies, colleagues, and friends: just as this hemisphere looks like it will soon be proclaimed the first totally polio-free region on earth, I believe it can also become the first to achieve universal salt iodization, the first to eliminate neonatal tetanus, the first to get ORT use up to 80 per cent, and so on. What you do here, what you strive for and accomplish here, has an enormous impact around the globe. Colombia's 1984 immunization campaign inspired similar efforts in numerous countries. But complacency could poison the progress you have made -- Bangladesh and India, for example, now have higher immunization levels than Latin America as a whole.

I would hope that each and every one of your heads of state will be able to stand up a year from now, at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, and report achievement of the mid-decade goals for children, rather than merely reiterating promises about what will be accomplished by the year 2000. This means, of course, that each and every one of us here today must redouble our efforts and make the next twelve months a period of historically unprecedented action for children.

Someone once said there are no short-cuts to the future -- but there is a fast lane. I know we can get on it; we are already off to a good start!