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Address from Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the  
Moroccan National Congress on the Rights of Children

Casablanca, Morocco  
25 May 1994

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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
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Moroccan National Congress on the Rights of Children

Casablanca - 25 May 1994

I am delighted and honoured to have this opportunity to address the National Congress on the Rights of Children. This gathering promises to be a real milestone not only for Moroccan children and society as a whole -- but also, indeed, for the entire region, in which Morocco is setting the pace in efforts for children. I would like to thank His Majesty King Hassan II, Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Meryem and the entire government of His Majesty for sponsoring this important event organized by the Moroccan Association in Support of UNICEF, and for the strong leadership they have provided to improve the lives of the beautiful children of this beautiful country.

During my last official visit to Morocco, in July 1992, His Majesty the King assured me that Morocco would soon ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Given Morocco's active support for the Convention when it was still in draft form, and the key role Morocco played in winning Arab support for General Assembly approval of the Convention in November 1989, I was certain that ratification would follow in due course.

You have exceeded our hopes and expectations. Not only have you ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but you have also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, among others, and moved swiftly into the all-important implementation phase.

This remarkable gathering that brings together government -- at the highest as well as the ministerial, parliamentary, expert and local levels -- and diverse representatives of civil society is proof of your determination to see to it that all children's rights are respected. Of all the countries that have ratified the Convention, Morocco is the first to hold a national-level follow-up congress like this one, aimed at charting a course toward full compliance with the Convention's provisions.

This meeting is one more indication that a new social ethic is beginning to gather momentum worldwide. It is an ethic that places human beings -- and particularly the poor -- at the centre of the development process, and gives children's basic needs a first call

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on society's concerns and resources. Permit me to briefly sketch its global evolution 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 rights, entered into force in 1990 after ten long years of debate complicated 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-nine countries have ratified it to date; only 31 have yet to do so, and 11 of these have signed their intention to pursue early 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. Later, I will suggest an important role for Morocco in achieving this goal.

The Convention recognizes every child's right to develop physically, mentally and socially to his or her fullest potential, to express his or her opinions freely, and to participate in decisions affecting his or her future. This new ethic goes for girls as well as boys; it applies to children living in rural and hard-to-reach areas as well as to those living in cities and other easily-accessible areas; it is as valid for children whose families and communities are poor as for those who are better-off; and it should benefit children of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities as well as those from the majority or mainstream of a given society. The Convention is a "Bill of Rights" for all children, and a code of binding obligations for governments, communities and parents with respect to the young.

As you know, the first global summit ever held -- bringing together leaders from North, South, East and West -- was convened in 1990 in the name of children. The World Summit for Children produced a remarkably specific set of principles and an action plan for reaching 27 ambitious but realistic 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 -- among them, of course, His Majesty King Hassan II -- have now signed the World Summit Declaration and Plan of Action; no other document in history has been signed by so many heads of state and government. Moreover, some 120 countries -- Morocco included -- have issued or drafted detailed National Programmes of Action for reaching mid-decade and year 2000 goals for children and women, and a growing number have issued State, provincial and municipal plans of action as well.

I am delighted that you will be hearing from Mr. Ibrahima Fall, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, who has worked very hard to ensure that children's rights are kept high on the world political agenda. 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 the provisions of the Convention relating to children's rights in health, education and nutrition. For the first time, respect for human rights -- in this case, a sub-set of children's rights -- can be gauged in terms of fulfillment of concrete goals around which global consensus exists, on a timeline agreed upon by the international community. This is the best way to quickly translate the extraordinary legal and ethical breakthrough of the Convention into tangible benefits for the world's poorest children. In Morocco, we can see children's rights to health and education, in particular, being translated into tangible, rapid progress.

As you know, there is another category of critically important rights enshrined in the Convention -- I am thinking of the provisions that protect children from exploitation and abuse. Now that the vast majority of nations have embraced the Convention, how do we judge a country's compliance in the field of child labour, for example, for which the international community has not adopted convenient targets and timelines? Passing and enforcing the necessary laws and regulations is obviously an essential part of what needs to happen, but eliminating such social evils is a complex undertaking that cannot be accomplished overnight in any society. But at the same time, if States Parties do not start moving seriously on this front, they open themselves to criticism for failing to comply with the relevant provisions of the Convention. What I am suggesting, then, is that countries where such problems are serious might consider developing national plans and timelines for compliance. Enforcement can be phased in over a realistic but not overly-long timeframe. For example, a country might set itself the goal of getting all children 12 years old and under out of the workplace and into the schoolroom within a specified period of years, starting with six year olds in the first time period, seven year olds in the second, and so on until achieving the goal.

Lest you think that my global assessment of efforts for children over the past few years is overly optimistic, let me assure you that I am not merely talking about paper promises -- concrete results are already becoming evident 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 some 25 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, which Morocco has adapted and enthusiastically embraced, have been endorsed by the governing bodies of the World Health Organization and UNICEF. 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.

I can say without hesitation that the cooperation between government and all components of the UN system in Morocco constitutes a model of harmony and coordination worth emulating worldwide.

Achievement of the mid-decade goals 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. Success in reaching these readily doable goals would pave the way for achieving the more complex year 2000 goals.

The task ahead remains formidable -- but a good start has been made, globally and in Morocco. 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.

This Congress shows that Morocco is putting the Convention on the Rights of the Child to work, rather than simply making adjustments in the legal system. This gathering should enable Morocco to accelerate its already-impressive momentum of progress for children. The seriousness of the preparations you have made for this landmark event reflect the seriousness with which you have taken up the World Summit for Children challenge. The conference papers on the state of Morocco's children have been prepared by sectoral commissions made up not only of government officials, but also non-governmental experts, NGOs and multi- and bilateral cooperation agencies, with important input from the presidents of the country's 1,544 communes who responded to detailed questionnaires sent out by Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Meryem on diverse aspects of children's lives. And the Congress itself is organized to permit breadth of participation and depth of analysis. This formula for success mirrors His Majesty the King's directives calling for multi-sectoral, decentralized implementation of the National Programme of Action.

Taken together, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Programme of Action are a powerful tool for accelerating the diverse efforts you have been making for children and women over the past years. Morocco is now in an excellent position to go all-out for the mid-decade and year 2000 goals.

Permit me to identify several areas meriting special attention:

\* In the health sector, Morocco has made important gains against the major child-killing and child-crippling diseases. In particular, your efforts in the area of **immunization** have turned Morocco into a role model for other nations. Yours was one of the first countries to reach the 1990 UCI goal, and success here has opened the way for cooperation and progress throughout the Maghreb region. And now, much to your credit, you are pursuing a mid-decade goal that is higher than the one set worldwide, one that will put you solidly in reach of the year 2000 goal. You have been a pioneer in the Vaccine Independence Initiative which enables countries to put vaccine supplies on firmer footing. The National Vaccination Days held annually in all countries of the Maghreb are testimony of the importance of the activity started here with the personal involvement of Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Meryem.

\* During my last visit I had the opportunity to discuss with His Majesty King Hassan II and his health team the need to greatly increase the use of **oral rehydration therapy** against the dehydration of diarrhoea, which is still the number one killer of young children in Morocco. At that time, ORT was being used in only 13 per cent of diarrhoea episodes. Now, thanks to the truly remarkable efforts of the past year and a half, coverage is almost up to 50 per cent. Because of these excellent early results, Morocco was invited to share its experience in CDD with health ministers and donor representatives from around the world at conferences in Washington D.C. and Mexico City last October. With the diarrhoea control and health weeks you have scheduled, and the active mobilization of provincial Governors, the media, scouts, teachers, NGOs, as well as health personnel, Morocco should be able to reach the 80 per cent coverage goal by the end of 1995.

\* Efforts in immunization and ORT can be used to push forward other elements of **primary health care**. I am thinking, in particular, of control of acute respiratory infections and the fight against iodine deficiency disorders. There is also a critical need to drastically reduce maternal mortality. The strategic concern here is to ensure that the high immunization coverage levels you are reaching are sustainable, and that national outreach will leave in place networks, structures and expertise that strengthen and extend the health system delivering a variety of services at the local level, with major participation by grassroots communities. In this connection, the African Bamako initiative of local management and financing of essential health services is being adopted by many countries seeking ways to extend services in the midst of

severe budgetary constraints, and Morocco may wish to consider adapting it to your needs and conditions.

\* Also during my last visit we discussed the imperative of accelerating progress for women, starting with the girl child -- with an emphasis on primary education and literacy. And here, too, you have started to take decisive action. I understand that recently there has been a decentralization of the educational system, with local officials assuming greater administrative and budgetary responsibility for the schools in their areas of jurisdiction. This should lay the basis for extending and revitalizing education, especially in underserved rural areas. Top priority must be given to attracting and retaining girls, and this will require the placement of schools closer to where they live; flexible class schedules and relevant curricula that take into account the agricultural and household chores girls are expected to perform; and, in particular, a resolute effort to eradicate traditional gender biases that disempower girls and women in virtually all spheres of life. Doing so would go a long way toward ensuring the equal rights to education enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In this context, I would hope that Her Highness Princess Lalla Meryem, who is serving as a genuine role model particularly in the field of health, will also provide high-profile leadership for girls' education. And active, visible support from His Majesty King Hassan II in this area is especially important in enlisting men's participation in this process.

\* There is a critical deficit of **safe drinking water and adequate sanitation** in rural areas, which undermines efforts being made to improve health conditions and constitutes an obstacle to economic development. The government has designed and approved an excellent master plan for providing safe water and sanitation, but implementation has apparently been slowed due to lack of resources. UNICEF's experience in this area is that the cost of providing these vital services goes way down -- to about \$20 per capita -- when low-cost technology is employed and there is active community participation and cost-sharing. And there is a greater willingness on the part of the international donor community to support this approach to water and environmental sanitation.

\* Lastly, UNICEF hopes to see Morocco's national programme of action for children and women translated into **provincial and municipal programmes**, so that implementation takes into account local realities. That way, effective partnerships can be developed between local authorities and civil society to improve children's lives.

These are some of the thoughts and suggestions I wanted to share with you today. I want to emphasize once more how impressed we at UNICEF are by the seriousness with which Morocco is implementing both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its National Programme of Action to achieve the World Summit goals. I was gratified to learn that the government has decided to devote each 4 October -- World Day of the Arab Child -- to a multi-sectoral review of progress in implementing the NPA, and that UNICEF has been invited to contribute to the progress report to be issued on that day. We have found that personal participation by heads of state and government in such evaluations makes all the difference in the world. This is an initiative which, like your immunization days, could be picked up by the rest of the Maghreb and Arab countries.

One final challenge. I would like to invite Morocco to use its prestige and influence to win universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ten of the 31 countries that have still not ratified are Islamic nations whose leaders, I suspect, would welcome your friendly counsel on this matter of vital global concern.

In closing, let me say that UNICEF is proud of its long and fruitful cooperation with His Majesty's government, and we are looking forward to continuing to be of assistance as Morocco works to achieve the mid-decade and year 2000 goals. If we persevere and make all-out efforts, I am certain that His Majesty King Hassan II will be in a position to announce substantial success at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen less than a year from now.